As Luck Would Have It

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Summary: Chapter 26! The Hydros Statue proves no challenge...but a wall in a cliffside does? Lama Temple's breezes are creating whispers in Ivan's mind? ...and, speaking of Ivan...why are things all black and white? More to come! R&R!Vil

Chapter 1: Totally pointless prologue that you can ...

As Luck Would Have It

By: Vilya

With help from Kaede, Norli and Avaria, and our alter-egos, Phoenix, Era, Kerena, and Elariel.

Hmm…what to say what to say…well, as the official first fic written by Vilya n Company, lets get this party started! Only, it's not exactly a party.

Disclaimer-er-er-er-er: Not mine. Nope. Well, Zoe, her oddball brothers, and her friends, and her blue baseball cap, they're mine. The rest of it isn't, I hope. And if it is…well, then my birthday wish has been granted early ;)

Summary-ish-thing: A Golden Sun fic. An average, ordinary girl gets thrown—literally—into the game. Yes, I know it's been done before. And I pray to whatever powers be that this isn't a Mary Sue. Besides, the character's half-based on Norli, so there's no way she's perfect ;)

Norli: I HEARD THAT!

Vil: And? On with the ficcy!

Note: This prologue isn't *really* Golden Sun-ish, not yet, but chapter one will be. And every chapter henceforth. Hehehe, that's a big word ;)

Prologue: It Wasn't Gonna be Pretty

"Zoe! Zoe, c'mere! You *gotta* see this!" Zoe Stanton rolled her eyes. Evan was always yelling. Well, almost always, and what time wasn't spent yelling was instead focused on eating. She had been wondering for *years* if her brother even possessed the quality of a soft voice or a whisper.

"*What* do you want, Evan?" She asked, tired of his need to show her things that she never thought were important. The one time he had shown her something worthwhile it had ended rather disastrously.

"Look at this! I beat the thing, Zoe! It was *so* awesome! It *exploded*!" Zoe raised an eyebrow at her younger brother, shook her head, and sighed. She didn't understand his love for those violent video games. Never did, never would.

"And I'm sure it was a very explosive explosion. Now if you don't mind, not that it makes a difference whether you mind or not, I have things to do. Have fun, little brother." Technically he wasn't Zoe's 'little' brother, being about a foot taller than she. But he *was* two years younger, and, as her older brother liked to say, about two centuries dumber.

Laughing to herself as she thought of her older brother, Zoe went back into her room, intending to finish her drawings. Drawing was her passion. Any picture she had finished and liked hung on her walls, her ceiling, her doors, everywhere. She didn't consider herself a master artist, in fact she thought she was far from, but it was her best work.

She looked down at the picture she was drawing now. It was a sketch of two boys, one slightly taller than the other. The shorter one's arms were thrown up in what she hoped looked like exasperation, and the taller one's were folded

angrily across his chest. The boys' eyes glared angrily at each other.

Zoe giggled. The looks on their faces were pure anger. In the back of her mind a story began to take place. The shorter boy had been made fun of for being short, yet he was older than the taller boy, and smarter. The background of the picture was a roughly-sketched forest, and it made Zoe wish she could visit whatever place her mind had just created. *Face it,* she thought bitterly, *you're stuck where you are, and as you are.*

'As she was' wasn't all that great. Zoe looked in my mirror and sighed. Straight brown hair, plain brown eyes. Like always.

As for where she was…the sound of laughter outside her window startled her, and she looked out and down. Smiling and waving up at her were her two best friends, Anna and Julie. They were pushing their bikes along ahead of them.

"We're meeting the team down at the park for a game of capture the flag!" Julie yelled up. Zoe assumed she meant their softball team. Besides softball, capture the flag was the sport they always played. "You wanna come?"

"Sure!" Zoe yelled back. She put her sketchpad down, quickly gathered her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail, put on her favorite blue baseball cap, and turned to go.

Something stopped her at the door. Some odd…feeling. Zoe turned and looked at the mess that was her room, and bent down and picked a backpack up off the floor. Almost without realizing it, she put her sketchpad, pencils, and other drawing tools in the bag, then at the last minute put in what she considered to be her best picture.

Slinging one of the straps over her shoulder and walking out the door, Zoe stopped in the kitchen to leave a note, puzzling over what had just occurred. Why would she be taking her drawing things to the park? She'd be playing capture the flag, so she knew she wouldn't need her things. Things like that didn't happen often, however, so she decided to take her things anyway.

Hurrying out the door and ignoring the looks Julie and Anna shot at her backpack, Zoe tugged on the visor of her hat and went into the garage for her bike. The park wasn't far—she wouldn't need her helmet. Getting on the bike, she rode with Anna and Julie towards the park, still wondering why she'd brought her pencils and paper with her.

When they got to their usual meeting place, a small, open-walled building that was usually called "the shelter," Zoe left her bike among the eleven other bikes and waved a hello to everyone else.

"What's in the backpack?" one of the girls asked.

"Well…" Zoe started, searching her mind for an explanation. "It's in case you have me guard our flag. It would give me something to do to pass the time."

"Oh," the girl said, seeming almost disappointed that she hadn't gotten some juicy story or some such. *That* must *be the reason*, Zoe thought. *Why* else *would I have brought art supplies to play a game*?

Teams were chosen, and somewhat surprisingly Zoe was picked to lead the team meant to go after the other team's flag. The teams split off, each on their own side of the park. One team would hide their flag, and the other team would plot how to get it.

"I have an idea!" Anna said. Both she and Julie were on Zoe's team, though Zoe had sent Julie around to spy. Standing a little ways off were two other members of Zoe's team, watching for any of the other team's spies. Zoe looked at Anna, who reached up and grabbed the hat off Zoe's head. Placing it on her own head, Anna grinned.

"I get it!" said Isabel, grinning. "You two *do* look alike, you know. And, if they do like always and go after the captain first, they'll think it's Anna, because she's wearing Zoe's hat!" Zoe smiled, and though not liking being unable to wear her favorite hat, they did have a point, and a good strategy. "In the meantime, Zoe, *you* go around like usual and sneak out the flag." Zoe nodded, wondering for a second why Isabel wasn't captain.

Almost right after that, Julie returned to say that she knew the location of the other team's flag. Everyone huddled close as she told them what she knew, then split off into groups, Zoe being the only one to go alone, and in a completely different direction. She knew of a few shortcuts to where she was going, and she didn't mind taking her bike to get there.

Jumping onto her bike, she hurriedly rode it into the woods, knowing where the trails were and not wanting to use them, to avoid being seen. Aside from softball and snowboarding, capture the flag was her favorite thing to do, and she had the tendency to take the game a bit *too* seriously.

Zoning out on one random thought after another, Zoe didn't see the fence ahead of her. She ran into it head-on, flying over her handlebars and, strangely, over the fence. Tumbling through the air, she knew she wasn't going to land on her feet. And even if she did, it wasn't gonna be pretty.

That was her last thought before her world went dark.

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Well? Review and tell me what you think, I PROMISE chapter one will come soon, and I'll get really into the Golden Sun part of the story. Til then, Vil, Kae, Nor, and Ava.

Chapter 2: Chapter One: The Path Ahead

Chapter 3: Chapter Two: Road's End

As Luck Would Have It

Disclaimer: I wonder how long it's gonna take them to figure it out. Ok, I own Zoe and Torrent, and that's it! That's all! I own nothing else in the entire GS universe!

Avaria: Now that we've got that covered, Vil, can we get on with it?

Vilya: Oh, go back to playing Tetris!

A/N: Ok, I'm hoping that **a)** this doesn't turn out to be a Mary Sue and **b)** that this won't follow the storyline too much, but that it does go in basically the same order. I know this could never occur in the actual game, but it's a fanfic. Deal with it.

Summary-like thing: All I know before I actually start writing this is that at the very end of the chapter, they make it to Vault. As I write this summary that's seriously all I know.

Chapter Two: Road's End

Zoe opened her eyes to the sound of birds chirping, and a cloudy grey sky overhead. She had no idea how late in the morning was, but the voices of Isaac and Garet packing told her she must have been awake for some time.

Standing and stretching, she took a quick look around, heading over to her pack and opening the drawstring. Inside she found a small pouch full of gold coins, an apple and a bottle of water, and in the very bottom, a pad of paper and some pencils.

Pulling the paper out of the sack, Zoe studied the drawing on the first page. A tall boy stood in an angry pose, glaring sideways at a slightly shorter boy. The shorter boy's back was turned to the tall one, and his arms were thrown up in exasperation. It looked like pretty awesome talent. *Did I draw this?* Zoe wondered.

"Nice picture," Garet commented from behind her. "The little one looks almost like Isaac."

"Little nothing! You *know* I'm older than you are, and smarter too! All of Vale knows that!" Isaac said defensively.

"Older, maybe. Smarter, I think not."

"If you're so smart, then why did it take you two years to learn to use your sword?"

"It took you two years too Isaac!"

"Not quite. And I had the technique down first."

"You were *born* first!" Garet yelled, anger glinting in his deep brown eyes.

"That has nothing to do with it!" Isaac was yelling also.

"It does so! It means you had more time than I did!"

"How, then?"

"It just does!"

"Argh! You're *impossible*, Garet!" Isaac yelled, turning his back to Garet and throwing his arms in the air. Garet crossed his arms over his chest and gave Isaac a steely glare before going back to his packing.

Flint jumped on to Zoe's shoulder and sighed. "You wouldn't know it from that, but those two have been best friends most of their lives." The Djinni jumped from Zoe's shoulder to her head and bounced a couple times. "I prefer Isaac's head."

"Oh, shut up Flint!" Isaac muttered, blushing and returning to his packing also. Zoe laughed and pulled flint from her head, struggling to disentangle his feet from her long hair. Again she was puzzled at its odd, silvery-purple hue, and its length, but her muddled mind couldn't recall her hair ever being any different.

"Interesting picture," the Djinni commented, before scurrying over to perch on Isaac's shoulder. Shrugging, Zoe shoved the pad of paper back into her pack and dug around in it for something to fix her hair with. Coming up with a hairbrush and an elastic band, Zoe tried to run the brush through her hair.

Almost instantly she discovered that it was a tangled mess. Brushing it would probably take over an hour. It didn't help that it looked like rain was on its way.

Right on cue, Isaac glanced up at the sky. "We should go soon."

"Just give me a minute, please," Zoe said, trying to go faster and only succeeding in making her hair more of a mess. Garet glanced over at her and rolled his eyes. "Girls," he muttered. "Jenna was the same way."

Slowing down, Zoe finally managed to get rid of the worst of the tangles. Maybe she couldn't remember anything about her life before last night, but somehow she knew taking care of her hair had once been much easier.

As quickly as she could, she gathered her hair into one long braid and tied it at the end. Putting her brush back in her pack and closing it, she slung its single strap over her shoulder and stood. "Ok, I'm ready."

"Then let's go," Isaac said, walking quickly. "I don't want to be caught out here in the middle of a big storm."

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About two hours later, the three were still walking. Flint was incessantly hopping from one person to the next, spending the longest time on Isaac's head. The boy didn't even seem to notice, however. His eyes seemed fixed on the sky, even when nothing about the grey sky seemed to be changing.

Garet, on the other hand, never looked up from the ground. His gaze was rooted on the tall grass and patches of dirt.

That left Zoe looking around at the landscape. There were occasional patches of trees, some big enough to be called forests, and mountains far in the distance on their left. For a moment the sun broke through the foreboding cloud cover, but soon enough was swallowed again by the flat, dark blanket above them.

I hate rain, Zoe thought, though she was unable to really remember being out in the rain before.

Almost at that instant, the skies opened and rain began to pour down in sheets. At this point there was almost no cover to be seen, and Flint, who had been on Zoe's head at the time, made a flying leap and landed on Isaac's head just as he covered it with his hood. The three began running

for the nearest stand of trees, which was some distance away.

By the time they reached the trees, Zoe's clothes were soaked through. "First thing we do when we get to Vault is get you a cloak," Garet said, pulling a blanket from his pack and handing it to her. She took it gladly and wrapped it around herself.

"Well, it looks like we can't go any farther for a while. Might as well stay here as anywhere," Isaac said glumly. He had wanted to get to Vault and stay in a real bed. He hated sleeping on the ground even more than Garet did, though he'd never admit it.

"Wouldn't it be better for us to travel in the rain?" Zoe asked, and both boys looked at her quizzically. "I mean…you said there were monsters around. Wouldn't they be staying somewhere out of the rain too?"

Isaac, about to say yes, thought suddenly back to another day of rain. The day the boulder had fallen from Mount Aleph, the rain had been coming down hard, much like it was now. He and Garet, both only fourteen at the time, had fought numerous monsters while trying to find help saving Jenna's brother Felix. But the boulder had fallen, and killed Isaac's father and Jenna's entire family—or so they'd thought.

"No," Isaac said finally, trying to shake the thoughts of that day three years ago from his mind. "No, they don't hide from rain. They'll be about no matter what the weather's like."

"Then let's just get to Vault even with the rain," Garet said. "Whether we wait or not, we're still going to have to fight whatever's waiting for us up ahead. And, really, being

wet is better than sleeping out here one more night." Zoe nodded her agreement.

"Besides," she added, "I'm going to have to split ways with you sometime, and I'll need to know how to use a weapon for myself."

Isaac nodded, though his mind had never really encountered the idea that Zoe might actually go off on her own. Despite her saying she came from Imil, so many other things didn't make sense. She hadn't had any weapons with her, and obviously couldn't use Psynergy. She had just made it sound like she couldn't even use the short sword Isaac had given her. Getting up, he began to walk again, Garet and Zoe close behind.

It had been raining for about an hour when they stopped to rest. Sitting in a different grove of trees, Isaac pried Flint off his head and set the Djinni in his lap. The rain had let up some, but not much. Garet stood and began to pace restlessly. Zoe looked at the ground, cheeks reddening. She knew this little break was primarily for her. In whatever past she'd had, she obviously hadn't walked for long distances.

A rustling in the bushes made them all start, and Garet and Isaac drew their swords and stood ready. Out of the bush jumped two zombie-like creatures, and down from a tree flew two bats. Zoe drew her own short blade and came to stand beside Garet.

One of the zombies launched itself at Zoe, raking her arm with its claws. Zoe let out a scream that shook the trees around them, lashing out with her sword gripped tightly in both hands. The zombie easily dodged her, slashing the same arm again. Garet saw her out of the corner of his eye,

but was too busy fending off the bats. He was about to call to Isaac, but stopped when he saw his best friend was busy with the other zombie.

Isaac's long sword was a great weapon, but the zombie could easily dodge many of Isaac's attacks. Finally, Isaac dropped the sword, raised one hand and yelled, "Squire's Quake!" The ground began to shake, and sections of it broke free and threw the zombie about. When the shaking stopped, the zombie was gone.

Garet let out a triumphant cry as he felled one of his bats. The other swooped down and tangled its claws in Garet's messy hair. "Hey! Get off me!" Garet yelled, though he knew better than to start slashing at the bat with his long sword. He'd be more likely to take off his own head.

Isaac turned, and seeing this, pulled his Djinni from where it had climbed into his hood. "Flint unleash!" he called, and the Djinni dove on the other bat in a flash of light, destroying it. Garet yelled as the Venus Djinni's unique fire singed the ends of his hair.

"Isaac! Not so close to my head!" Garet warned, putting his sword away. "Zoe?" He and Isaac turned to her in time to see a small blue shape jump down from one of the trees and throw itself at the zombie, destroying it. The blue streak then shot towards Zoe and landed in her good hand. Her sword was already in its sheath, and she marveled at the little creature that had saved her.

"Zoe?" Isaac asked softly, walking over to her with Garet. He looked at what she held in her hand and gasped. "Zoe! That's a Mercury Djinni! How did you get it?"

"You saw," she said evenly. "It came from that tree. It protected me."

"Hello there," the Djinni said. "I am called Torrent. I am a Mercury Djinni, bound to the power of the element Water."

"Guess you have a Djinni, Zoe. I'm beginning to think you *are* an adept!" Garet grinned, looking up at the sky. "Looks like the rain's about through. Should we get going?"

"Uh…sure. Let's go," Zoe said, clenching her hands behind her back as the Djinni jumped onto her shoulder. Zoe's falsely bright smile failed to get past Garet however, and something he had seen during the battle came to him. Gently, he took hold of Zoe's left arm and pulled it around where he and Isaac could see. Her arm was covered with scratches from the zombie's clawlike hands.

"You should have said something," Isaac said as he dug around in his pack. "Rats. Not here. Remind me to get more herbs when we reach Vault." Closing his pack and putting it on his back again, he sighed. Then his eyes lit up as he remembered a very useful Psynergy. Once he'd learned about it, he'd studied and practiced as hard as he could, just as he had with all the Psynergies he'd learned. Grinning at them both, he placed one hand on Zoe's arm.

"Squire's Cure," he said, and energy seemed to flow up from the earth itself and through Isaac's hand. Almost instantly the scratches were gone.

"Nice trick," Garet said. "Might you have told me about that *before* we faces those three skeletons yesterday morning?"

"I completely forgot. And besides, it uses up energy, just like all Psynergies do." Isaac stepped out from the trees then and grinned. "All clear. Literally. Rain's over. Let's go to Vault!"

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The sun was on its way to setting when Garet spotted buildings in the distance. "Do you hear something?" Zoe asked, and Torrent nodded.

"Hoofbeats. Horses. Coming this way," Garet said. A growing dust cloud approached them, though it passed by with plenty of room to spare. They heard a voice shout, "South to Kalay!" and what they could now see as a train of wagons passed them. They shrugged at one another and continued walking.

They had nearly reached the gates of Vault when the train passed them again, this time heading in the opposite direction. Isaac's keen ears picked up the words, "The bridge is out! On to Lunpa!" amid the sound of hooves and wheels. Then the train was past again.

Five minutes later, the setting sun illuminated the town of Vault. Surrounded by the orange and red glow, the three companions stepped through the gates and into Vault.

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Well? Another chapter done! Two in one day!

Avaria: She's only doing it this fast because school's still out!

Vil: So? I'll do what I can while I have the time. So, if you want the next chapter, review!

Review, by the way, involves hitting this little button right down here ;)

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Chapter 4: Chapter Three: Explanations

As Luck Would Have It

Disclaimer: Instead of listing what I don't own, I'll list what I do own. Zoe, Torrent, a can of vanilla coke, my watch, some creme savers, uhhh…that corner over there…*points* and anything else in this fic that wouldn't normally exist in the GS world. Hopefully, this chapter will be longer than the others, as I'm going to get into the actual explanation here.

Ava: She'll be done by tomorrow this time. And probably halfway done with chapter four.

Vil: I can't help it. I'm hyper. Now on with the ficcy!

Chapter Three: Explanations

Zoe woke early the next morning. The three of them had spent the night in Vault's Inn. Zoe had offered to pay, but Isaac had waved her away, saying it would only cost them about five coins apiece.

Now, taking her little coin pouch and putting it in her pocket, Zoe was off to buy some decent clothes. And maybe a better sword, if she had any money left.

Outside, she was at first overwhelmed by the buildings and people around her. She knew none of them, didn't even really recognize the signs on the buildings. *Which makes sense, if I really came from that Imil place*, Zoe reasoned. With Torrent on her shoulder, she made her way around the town, stopping in front of a building with

what looked like a bow and a sword on a sign hanging from above the door.

Going inside, she found displayed on one side of the store an array of weapons of all kinds. On the other side were racks of helmets, gloves, and, to her relief, clothing.

Looking at what she was wearing, she decided she'd buy things like what she had now—leggings, tunics and shirts. She bought two shirts, a white and a green, a light blue vest, some deep violet leggings, and a dark blue robe. At this point she was down to a handful of coins, so she took what she had and left, taking her things back to her room at the Inn and packing them in her sack.

Garet and Isaac arrived then, Isaac walking with his hands behind his back. "You're hiding something," Zoe accused, and Isaac grinned sheepishly.

"Guilty," he said, and brought out a dark green cloak, handing it to Zoe.

"Wow," she said, taking it and shaking it out so it fell full-length before her. "This is…Isaac…Garet…you didn't have to do this for me…"

"Yes we did. Or, I did. That was my gift to you, for… when we part ways." Isaac grinned. "For the rest of the day, you're going to make use of Garet's gift."

"Gift?" Zoe eyed Garet suspiciously. "What gift?"

"I'm going to attempt to teach you how to use that sword. Like you said, you need to know how to use it for…for when you leave." Zoe noticed that both boys had been reluctant to admit that she would leave them and go off on her own.

"Well, we've got a day ahead of us, then," Zoe said, smiling. "Let's get started."

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It was almost time for dinner. Zoe could tell by when the chiming clock in the Inn rang five times. But she wasn't about to move. She was too stiff from a whole day of learning how to use her short sword.

"It'll be stupid, not to come to dinner," Isaac said casually, absently petting Torrent on the head. "But, if you're honestly going to stay here…should I bring something up?"

"No," Zoe said, rolling over and sitting on the edge of her bed. "I'll come. I'll be down in a minute, Isaac." Isaac nodded and left, Flint waving from his spot on Isaac's shoulder.

"C'mon Torrent," Zoe said, standing with a groan. She didn't need her memory to know she'd never worked this hard before. "We're going to dinner."

"Yes! Dinner!" Torrent cried, sounding like one of the young children of Vault. Slowly, Zoe descended the stairs, and gratefully sank into the chair Isaac pulled out for her at their table.

The three were sitting with two other guests at the Inn—a man named Bert and his young daughter, Elisa. The girl seemed full of energy and eagerly talked about the city she had come from, a far-off place called Tolbi.

"That was before the bridge was destroyed in the eruption," Bert added. "Now, we're stuck here with no way back home."

"But I don't mind," Elisa added, grinning. "I *like* Vault. I especially like being up on the big bell-ringer's platform in the northeast part of town."

"Is it very high?" Zoe asked, swallowing a mouthful of the soup she was eating.

"Oh, it's up on the cliffs first off, and then it's taller than even the Inn," Elisa said happily. "I just *love* high places."

"I'm not very fond of heights," Zoe said quietly.

"Then you've never been to the big mountain?"

"The big mountain?"

"It's far to the north, though not as far north as Imil. I believe it's called Mount Aleph." Bert took an enormous bite of his sandwich then, but then he was a big man, so it wasn't so large a mouthful for him.

"Mount Aleph?" Garet asked, wide-eyed. Isaac elbowed him—hard—in the ribs. Bert only nodded, still chewing his sandwich.

Garet seemed about to say something else when the door to the Inn burst open. All heads in the room turned and stared at the boy who walked in. He had short blond hair that fell around his face, and big violet eyes. He carried a stick, which was obviously his weapon, and he looked as though he was going to burst into tears at any moment.

"Ivan!" said the mayor of Vault, whom the three had met the night before. "I thought you went back to Kalay with Master Hammet?"

"Halfway to Lunpa he found out his Shaman's Rod was missing. He said I was responsible for stealing it. He sent me back here, to find it, and said I wasn't to leave until I had it. Then I was to come to Lunpa and give it to him." Every time the boy said the word 'Lunpa,' a muted gasp went around the room.

"Lunpa, eh?" the mayor asked. "Your master has walked himself right into an unplanned trap, lad. Dodonpa won't let him out without a ransom now. He might not even let him out *with* a ransom."

"It's not really that I'm worried about. I know how dangerous Lunpa is. But I wasn't the one who stole the Shaman's Rod. I wasn't responsible for it, either—I was barely allowed to touch the thing!"

"Calm down, Ivan," the mayor said, standing and heading for the door. "Come with me and we'll figure this out. Until we find your master's Rod, you can stay with my family and me."

The mayor guided Ivan out by the shoulder, shutting the door behind him. Gradually everyone in the room went back to their dinner. Everyone except Zoe, Isaac and Garet. They went upstairs to Isaac and Garet's room.

There was a small table in the room with two chairs around it. Isaac and Zoe sat in the chairs, and Garet sat on the edge of his bed.

"I'd like to know about all these things that are going on," Zoe said, resting her head on her hand and her elbow on the table. "A volcano erupted?"

"Should I tell her the whole thing?" Isaac asked, looking to Garet. Garet shrugged.

"She's an adept, or she should be. I don't see why you *can't* tell her."

"Ok then. But prepare yourself for a long one."

"Three years ago, there was a terrible storm one day in Vale. The citizens were warned that the giant boulder on top of Mount Aleph was going to fall, and to get to the plaza at the center of town for safety. I found Garet and we headed that way, and we ran into Jenna, a friend of ours, and her family trying to save her brother Felix from drowning in the fast-moving river.

"Jenna joined Garet and I, and we made our way to the plaza to get help. The rain was pouring down, but we still had to fight the monsters that had somehow gotten into Vale. That's how I knew they'd still be out in the rain.

"When we finally found someone who had enough Psynergy left to save Felix. Garet and I had no skill with Psynergy at the time. But when we got to Felix, it was too late. The boulder had fallen and was heading straight for them. Jenna's entire family died under the boulder. So did my father.

"Garet and I went to get help, but were stopped along the way by a mysterious duo, a man and woman who looked rather strange. We were pretty much beaten senseless by them, and left unconscious to be found hours later.

"Vale was pretty quiet after that, until three years later. Garet, Jenna and I were pretty good with Psynergy by that point, she and he both being Mars Adepts and me being a Venus Adept. That day, we went to Kraden's home to continue our studies on Alchemy.

"Kraden was a good teacher and a wise old man, despite being a bit…cowardly. He taught us that the four elements, Earth, Fire, Water, and Wind, made up everything in existence. But that day, the mysterious duo reappeared. The man, Saturos, and the woman, Menardi, were plotting to use Kraden in some ultimate plot to enter Sol Sanctum, the shrine to the sun that lies at the top of Mount Aleph.

"Kraden took us into Sol Sanctum, and we began a search for the things Menardi and Saturos had spoken of. We eventually found two rooms, one that was a shrine to Sol, the sun, and one that was to Luna, the moon. On the floor above this was a puzzle involving using Psynergy to move statues that would disarm a trap.

"We later discovered that it was this very trap that set off the boulder three years before. Once we had disarmed the trap, Kraden came to us and said that things had changed in the Luna room. We went to see for ourselves, and it was true. The mosaic of Luna on the floor had changed to an image of Sol. Likewise, in the Sol room, the floor design now looked like Luna.

"A light was coming from the floor of the new Luna room, and by touching the wall it pointed to, a strange sort of gate pulled us up and into the secret chamber at the very top of Mount Aleph: the Elemental Star room.

"The four Elemental Stars hold the pure essences of all four elements. Garet and I had gathered three of them when Saturos and Menardi appeared, along with a strange man with a masked face. They demanded the Elemental Stars, and Garet and I refused. The man removed his mask, and we discovered that it was Felix, Jenna's brother, believed to be dead for three years.

"We had agreed to hand over the three stars in exchange for Jenna's freedom, and Garet was on the way, when a fourth person appeared in front of him. It was Alex, a 'friend' of Saturos and Menardi. He took the first three Stars and demanded the fourth before he'd let Jenna go.

"Taking the fourth Star caused the volcano to begin to erupt. The Wise One, the guardian of the Stars, saved Garet and I, but we weren't fast enough to stop Alex and his crew from taking Jenna and Kraden hostage. They are going around and trying to light the four Elemental Lighthouses using the Stars."

"However," Garet put in, "I'm still carrying the Mars Star. Technically, there's no way they can light every lighthouse."

"Yes," Isaac put in, "but they won't hesitate to try and steal it from us. We were sent on a quest to stop them from lighting the lighthouses, and to get back the Elemental Stars. I'm just praying we succeed."

"You were right," Zoe said, standing, stretching and yawning. "That was a long tale. But I feel better knowing. Perhaps you should know my little secret, too."

"Little secret?" Garet asked. "Tell us, then."

"I lost my memory."

"What?!"

"I can remember very few things about the time before I met you. I remember my name, and that I am sixteen, and that the night of the day I was knocked out should have been a full moon, not the tail end of the third quarter. Aside from random flashes, that's all."

"Thank you for telling us, Zoe," Isaac said quietly. Seeing her yawn again, he smiled, giving her a little shove toward the door. "Bed, Zoe. You'll need your sleep for tomorrow." Curious about Isaac's plans but too tired to argue, Zoe only nodded. She went to her rooms and collapsed into bed, asleep in seconds.

It was not so for Isaac and Garet, who sat up talking long into the night before they too went to sleep.

****

Yes! Three chapters without sleep in between! Here ya go folks! Chapter four is going to be, of course, the Ivan chapter, everything involving Ivan. But that won't come until at least tomorrow night. Til then! ~Vil

Chapter 5: Chapter Four: You Read My Mind

As Luck Would Have It

Disclaimer: Do I seriously have to do this every chapter?

A/N: Again, all I know when I start this is, the crew's going to meet Ivan, and the bandit fight is gonna start off the next chapter, not be in this one. So enjoy! And by the way, I have the fifth chapter written, but I won't post it until I hit at least 10 reviews.

Kaede: In the meantime, she's gonna type up a storm cause she's on a GS high. Not that it's a bad thing. So, Vil, get on with it!

Chapter Four: You Read My Mind

"Zoe, get up! C'mon, get up!" Garet shook Zoe's shoulder. Her eyes flew open, and she sat up, running her hands through her hair.

"What?" she asked sleepily, eyes half-shut.

"Isaac's had another of his 'great ideas' and now we're going to go meet that Ivan kid from last night."

"Oh…ok, sure…I'll get ready," Zoe said, waving a hand at him. Garet took the hint and left the room, joining Isaac downstairs. Isaac looked up and, seeing Garet, wordlessly tossed him an apple. Garet caught it and bit into it, grinning.

A few minutes later Zoe came running down the stairs, long hair looking tangle-free and pulled into a long braid again. She was wearing a green shirt and purple leggings, and had her sword buckled onto her belt. She grabbed a fruit from the bowl on the table, ate it quickly, and smiled.

"Alright, Isaac, what's your 'great idea' that Garet woke me up with?" she asked, her tone giving away her thoughts on using the words 'great idea.'

"We're going to the mayor's house. We're gonna meet Ivan," Isaac said, pushing himself away from the wall he'd been leaning on.

"Any particular reason why?" Flint asked, jumping onto Isaac's shoulder.

"I'm curious. And I think it's stupid to leave a little kid like that behind, and worse to send him back while your traveling out in the open. Maybe we can help him."

"He likes to help people," Garet said with a mock-exaggerated sigh. "But I can't complain. If it weren't for us having to help people we wouldn't even have left Vale."

After a few moments, the three left the Inn. Isaac led the way to the mayor's house, muttering something when he saw a young man fixing a hole in the Inn's roof. The stairs to the mayor's house seemed rickety to Zoe, but she reasoned that it was because she was afraid of heights.

"Hello," Isaac said as the mayor opened the door for them. His two children were playing by the fire, and his wife was busy with her back to them, doing something on a table. In the back of the large room was Ivan, sitting on a chair and staring out the window.

"He told me his secret!" the mayor's daughter whispered to Zoe. "I'll tell you if you want!"

"Ok," Zoe said, grinning. The little girl grinned back and whispered, "He can talk to animals!"

"Really?" Zoe asked. "That must be so cool!"

Isaac and Garet approached Ivan, who turned and looked at them with a blank stare. "Hello," the boy said flatly.

"Hi Ivan," Isaac said. "We saw you at the Inn last night. Was something wrong?"

"Why do you care?" Ivan asked, face hardening. He stood and faces Isaac, and Garet had to hold back a laugh. Ivan was a head shorter than Isaac, but he looked like he'd gladly beat Isaac up if he said anything.

"Because, like Garet says, I like to help people." Isaac shrugged, and Garet grinned. Ivan's eyes suddenly went distant, and a ghostly white glow surrounded him. Waves of the light seemed to go between Ivan and Isaac, until suddenly they stopped, and Ivan smiled.

"Ok, so you're telling the truth. I'll tell you why I'm here. Master Hammet lost his Shaman's Rod, a weapon. He thinks I've stolen it, or that I lost it here in Vault. I know I did neither. There are a few strange people here, they got here the day before we left for Kalay, and they're still here now. And other things are missing, too. The sanctum here is missing their gold statue, and the mayor's missing a vase, I think."

"Hold on a second…you read Isaac's mind, didn't you?" Garet said, looking Ivan hard in the eye.

"Well…yes. That's partially why Master Hammet sent me back, and not one of his stronger men. He thought my strange powers would protect me."

"You're an adept! Your powers are called Psynergy."

"You can see when I use my power? No one else can. You have strange powers too, don't you?" Ivan was almost laughing with excitement. "Then I'm not a freak?"

"No, you're not," Isaac said. "You're an adept, in fact I think you're a Jupiter Adept. There were a few of those in Vale." Isaac grinned. Ivan grinned too, and the two of them shook hands. Ivan turned and looked questioningly at Garet, who rolled his eyes and smiled, shaking hands with the boy.

"Who was that girl you came in with?" Ivan asked, glancing over at Zoe. Seeing him look, she walked over to them. "Hello," she said. "I'm Zoe."

"Hi. I'm Ivan. Are you an adept too?" Ivan asked, then gasped when he saw the little creature jump onto her head.

"Isaac and Garet say I should be. I don't know how to use Psynergy, but I can see it. And this," she said, pulling the creature off her head, "is Torrent, a Mercury Djinni."

"Pleased to meet you, Ivan," Torrent said. Flint chose that moment to appear as well. "That's Flint, Isaac's Venus Djinni."

"You'll help me too?" Ivan asked, and Zoe nodded. "Good. Then I can find that Shaman's Rod and take it to Lunpa for Master Hammet."

"I don't think you'll get quite so far," the mayor cautioned. "Lunpa will be locked tight now that they've got

Hammet inside the walls. They'll want a ransom for him."

"Well, let's find the Rod first," Garet said after a pause. "We have to find that before we can get anywhere, right?"

"Right," Isaac agreed, and Ivan's face brightened.

"You're really going to help me?"

"Of course we are, Ivan," Isaac said warmly, slinging an arm around the boy's shoulder. "Come on, we'll treat you to some lunch." Isaac led Ivan out the door, leaving Zoe and Garet staring after him.

"They sure hit it off," Garet commented, and he and Zoe said goodbye to the mayor and left. Outside the brightness was nearly blinding, and Zoe had to blink a few times before she could make out Ivan standing in front of her. Her eyes were level with the top of his head, so she had to look down a little to meet his gaze. He was smiling and holding a hand out to her.

"We never really met," he said by way of explanation, and Zoe gladly took his hand and shook it. For a moment it was as though some strange force was racing through her, but when Ivan let go of her hand it stopped. She shrugged it off, instead looking past Isaac and Ivan at the man who was watching them all. Everything about him seemed dark and foreboding, and his hard glare was openly angry and even a bit afraid.

"Don't turn around," she whispered to Isaac and Ivan, "but there's a suspicious man over there, watching." To confirm this, Garet nodded, smiling all the while. The four of tem began heading towards the man, pretending not to notice as Isaac and Garet told Ivan about Zoe's rather pitiful

lesson in swordplay the previous day. As they reached the man, Isaac reached the height of the story, and all four of them burst out laughing.

"Were you *really* that bad, Zoe?" Ivan asked in disbelief.

"They're being kind," she said, a devilish grin on her face. "I was worse."

They had lunch at the Inn, then headed upstairs, and were almost to Isaac's room when the same man ran up the stairs, shoved past them, and hurried into the room at the end of the hall. Looking at each other, the four of them nodded and followed him. They walked into the room and ducked behind the wall, listening to the three men in the room talk.

"Did they see you?" a gruff voice asked.

"They walked right past me, but I don't think they paid me any special attention," was the deep reply.

A rather whiny, cowardly voice cut in, "We should leave town! If not, we'll be discovered!" The four chose that moment to burst in on the men.

"It's that weird kid!" one of them yelled, and the three instantly retreated to the back of the room. "Surround them," Ivan muttered, and Garet and Isaac split off, each coming at the men from a different side of the room. Zoe and Ivan came at them from the middle, and the three were quickly surrounded. Ivan saw his opportunity and took it, and used his mind-reading power to read the thoughts of the three men.

When he was finished, all three men began to go for their weapons, and the four took their cue and fled, running for Zoe's room, as it was closer. Once inside, Zoe locked the door with the key she had been given, and turned to Ivan. "What did you learn?"

"It's them alright," Ivan said, face sullen. "They took the Shaman's Rod, and everything else too. And they've hidden it all right here in the Inn. Under our very noses."

"Then we'll have to search the Inn," Garet said decisively. Isaac nodded his agreement.

"If you want my opinion," Flint said, hopping over onto Ivan's shoulder, "I think you should steer clear of those thieves. They could be dangerous."

"They *are* dangerous," Ivan said gloomily. "They came from Lunpa. But c'mon, lets go look. Then I'll have to figure out how to get to Master Hammet." Nodding, the four of them left the room and hurried down the stairs and racing out the door.

They almost collided with a very angry woman. Isaac recognized her as one of the maids who worked in the Inn. "That darn Derek," she muttered angrily as she brushed past them. "Never gets his jobs done! That roof could have been fixed hours ago!"

"Ivan?" Isaac asked, and Ivan turned to look at him, walking backwards a few steps. "How did the hole in the roof get there? I mean, I'm pretty sure Garet wasn't up there jumping." Garet glared.

"Oh, they said that a big rock crashed down onto it, but I didn't hear or feel anything like a crash. The hole

showed up the day after…the day after the thieves got here!"

"Good enough place to start," Garet said, beginning to climb the ladder that led to the roof. "Well? You guys coming, or not?!" Hurriedly, Isaac and Ivan followed, the latter looking down at Zoe, who, after a bit of a hesitation, climbed up after them.

Another ladder led down into the hole and onto what appeared to be part of the second floor of the Inn. Zoe was the last to climb down the ladder, and all four of them stood there staring at a hole in the floor. On the other side of the hole was a big wooden box. Next to the box they could see a door, obviously leading into another room.

"Even if we wanted to get across," Zoe observed, "we can't move that box out of the way."

"Great idea Zoe!" Isaac said, grinning and approaching the edge of the hole. Holding out one hand, he closed his eyes and whispered, "Move." He was surrounded by the glow of his Psynergy, and a phantom-like hand reached out and moved the box out of the way.

"What do we do now?" Zoe asked, half-afraid of the answer.

"We jump over," Isaac said, and did so, landing lightly on his feet. Garet jumped also, landing somewhat heavily, and stumbling after he landed, but he made it. Ivan hesitated, so Zoe came up next to him and smiled before she jumped herself. Ivan gulped down his fear, backed up a few steps, and ran at the hole. At the very last second he closed his eyes and leapt, surprising himself by landing on his feet, then losing his balance and rolling into the wall.

"Ivan?" Zoe asked, helping him stand. "Are you alright?" Ivan nodded, embarrassed. Zoe nodded too, and followed Isaac and Garet through the door and into a room full of wooden boxes and barrels. The four split up and began to search the small room.

Isaac came upon a partially open box and lifted the lid the rest of the way. In the box was a golden statue that reminded him of the statue in Sol Sanctum back home. "Found one!" he called, hurrying back to the entrance to meet the others.

"Looks like we've been found out," said a gruff voice, and all four gasped as the three thieves walked in the door.

****

Oooh! Cliffhangers! Only at least 10 reviews will get you to the next chapter, so get reviewing!

Kaede: Before Vil loses her mind. Please.

Chapter 6: Chapter Five: Fond Farewells

As Luck Would Have It

Disclaimer: Read the previous fifty billion.

A/N: Like before, the only think I know going into this chapter is that in the beginning, Isaac and co. are going to fight those thieves, and at the end Isaac and co. minus Ivan leave for Goma Cave/Bilibin.

Norli: It doesn't help that I pronounce Bilibin as "Billy-bean" every chance I get. It drives Vil crazy.

Vil: yes, it does. But, now, to get on with it…

Chapter Five: Fond Farewells

"Looks like we've been found out," said a gruff voice, and the three thieves entered the small room. "Hey look," said the thief on the right, the owner of the gruff voice. "Look, boss, it's that weird kid!"

"Yeah!" said the deep voice, which belonged to the thief on the far right. Ivan struggled to hold back a laugh as he remembered something from the thieves' previous conversation.

"Shut yer yaps, both of ya!" said the high, whiny, cowardly voice, which belonged to the leader of the three bandits. Ivan could no longer control himself and began to giggle uncontrollably. "Shut you up too, kid! Yer about to feel the full power of a thief!"

"But why attack us?" Isaac said, his voice calm. "Just give back what you stole, and you can go."

"You're serious? You'd let us go if we apologized and returned the stuff we stole?" the boss thief asked incredulously.

"No way!" the gruff-voiced thief said angrily. "We stole that stuff fair and square! Let's get 'em!" Drawing their swords, the three thieves advanced on Isaac, Ivan and Garet.

Zoe, unnoticed, had ducked behind a pile of boxes. As silently as she could, she drew her short sword and raised it high, coming up behind one of the thieves. That particular thief was facing Ivan, who held up his staff and used it to deflect blows from the bandit's blade. When Ivan saw Zoe, his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, and the thief turned to see what the boy was staring at.

"Now, Ivan!" Zoe cried, before the thief hit her over the head with the hilt of his sword and she dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Ivan's face set in determination and he threw a hand towards the sky. "Wind Seer's Ray!" he cried, and bolts of lightning came down and struck all three of the thieves.

"Flint, now!" Isaac yelled, and the Djinni dove on the lead bandit. Acting quickly, Isaac put his hands together in front of him. "I summon the spirit of Venus, power of the Earth!" he cried, throwing both arms high. Flint looked up at Isaac and smiled, dissolving into golden light and pelting down on the three thieves.

Garet and Ivan both dropped their weapons in awe as the thieves fell to the ground, defeated but not killed. Isaac looked about to fall as well, but Garet hurried over to him

and supported him. They both looked over at Ivan and Zoe, and their faces wore nearly identical frowns when they found themselves looking at only Ivan.

"I'll go get the mayor," Ivan said hastily, running from the room. Isaac and Garet could hear him jump the hole and scurry up the ladder. Isaac bent to pick Flint up off the ground, and looked around for Zoe. Garet did the same, and when he saw her motionless on the floor he cried out and hurried over to her, picking her up easily.

"Do I want to know?" Isaac asked as he looked at her. Torrent, forgotten during the fight, pulled herself out of Zoe's pocket and climbed on Garet's shoulder.

"Ack! Water Djinni! Aieee!" Garet cried mockingly, and Torrent stuck her tongue out at him.

"You want me to spray you?" she asked wryly, proving she could by aiming a small jet of water at Isaac.

"Hey, stop that!" Isaac laughed, holding his hands up to block the water. As a result, the water bouncing off his hands landed on Garet, who glared, and Zoe, who slowly pulled herself awake.

"Put me down, Garet!" she said drowsily. "I'm alright, really. I gave Ivan an opening, I think, though it wasn't a plan. I said, *put me DOWN*!!!" Garet, surprised at the outburst, nearly dropped her, to the obvious amusement of Isaac and the Djinn. Zoe resisted the urge to slap them all, and instead bent down to pick up her sword and put it back in its sheath.

"Alright, Zoe, just what kind of Adept *are* you?" Garet asked testily. "You don't seem to have any Psynergy attacks,

but you certainly can see our Psynergy, and you have a Djinni. So please, explain yourself."

"That's just it," Zoe said, looking at the floor. "I can't. I'm not even sure I come from Imil. If I have any powers like yours, I don't know about them."

"Personally," Isaac said brightly, "I think she's a Mercury Adept. Which would be a benefit to us as well as to her."

"Why is that a benefit?" Zoe asked curiously. Torrent leapt from Garet's shoulder to hers and began to laugh.

"Mercury Adepts use the power of Water, frozen or otherwise. They are healers, or most of them are. That's why —" Isaac was cut off by the arrival of Ivan and the mayor, the latter gasping at the thieves who lay sprawled on the ground. Behind the mayor came two big, strong men, who proceeded to take the thieves out of the Inn and lock them in Vault's prison.

The mayor went through the boxes and came back with his vase, the Sanctum's golden statue, and, to Ivan's delight, Master Hammet's Shaman's Rod.

"Thank you for catching the thieves, Isaac, Garet, Ivan, Zoe," he said before he left. The four of them were alone in the loft again, staring at each other. Finally all four of them collapsed in relieved laughter.

"Where will you go now?" Ivan asked Isaac. "Or are you staying here for a while?"

"We're not sure where we have to go," Isaac said cryptically, and Ivan's eyes began to take on a distant quality. The room became filled with a silvery glow.

"Isaac, he's reading our minds again!" Garet said, wishing he knew how to block Ivan's power. "Should we stop him?"

"No," Isaac said calmly. Garet pouted, but could do nothing about it. Isaac had been chosen as the leader back in Vale, and Garet had agreed to follow his decisions.

When Ivan was finished, his eyes were wide in awe. "So that's why you're here," he said softly, then whistled. "Thank you, then, for taking time out from your quest to help me. But I've got to go to Lunpa and find Master Hammet," he added, rising and picking up the Shaman's Rod. "Maybe I'll meet you guys again some day, huh? Good luck on your quest..." Ivan shook his head and ran from the loft.

About five minutes later, Isaac, Garet and Zoe climbed out of the loft. Together they climbed the stairs by the mayor's house and walked along the high cliffs a little ways, stopping near a tree and sitting down in the long, cool grass. Isaac lay back with his hands under his head and looked up at the sky. Garet assumed a similar position, only kept his hands on either side of his head instead of under it. Zoe sat with her back against the tree, tilting her head back and closing her eyes. Torrent and Flint climbed into the branches of the tree and acted as lookouts, though they all knew no lookouts were needed.

"It's different without Ivan, isn't it?" Isaac asked after a while. Though he couldn't see them, Zoe and Garet nodded. "And we didn't even know him for an entire day." Almost on cue the town bell rang five times, signaling dinner.

"Let's go," Garet said, standing and stretching. Zoe, Isaac, Flint and Torrent followed him. As they descended the

stairs, the mayor approached them, holding something in his hand.

"This is for you," he said, giving them each a small pouch full of coins. "Part of it is what was taken from the thieves, and part of it is what Vault owes you for catching them. Use it well!" With that he turned and hurried back into his house. The three looked at each other and shrugged, then began again to head to the Inn.

Over dinner, they heard some of the travelers passing through speaking about, 'a lighthouse near Bilibin.'
"Where's Bilibin?" Zoe asked.

"On the other side of the Goma Mountains. We'll have to detour through Goma Cave to get there." Isaac sighed and looked around the room sadly. "Looks like this is our last night in Vault. We leave first thing in the morning. Get a good sleep, guys."

Isaac and Garet fell asleep almost instantly. Zoe, however, spent a few hours awake, thinking about exactly what kind of adept she might be. Her thoughts brought no conclusions, however, and she finally gave up and went to sleep.

****

The sun was shining in the clear blue sky the next morning. The three sat together and ate breakfast, then said their goodbyes to the people of Vault. Zoe's heart wrenched as she, Isaac and Garet passed through the city gates, but her spirits soared when they put the town behind them and turned east, headed for Goma Cave and the town of Bilibin beyond.

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Well, did ya like it? On a late note, I don't mind constructive criticism, but outright flames for no decent reason will be deleted from the review page anyway. Or maybe Garet could borrow them. So, see you in the next chapter! ~Vil.

Chapter 7: Chapter Six: Explorer's Storm

Chapter 8: Chapter Seven: For One To Fly

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Like I said, I'm not disclaiming anymore. I did enough of that. As usual, all I know going into this chapter is that it's possible that the gang will get through Goma Cave by the end. But then again, maybe not. Who knows? See, you have to read to find out. ;)

Chapter Seven: For One To Fly

"Alright! Goma Cave!" Garet cried happily the next afternoon. "Now we can go through it, go to Bilibin and sleep in real beds!"

"Not so fast, fire-head," Zoe said playfully, reaching up to mess with Garet's hair. "You really want to be up all night walking through that cave, that has who-knows-what living inside it?"

"No, not really."

"I didn't think so."

"Both of you stop it," Isaac said testily. "We've got a climb ahead of us. We're going to stay the night up on that cliff there. Nothing will be able to climb up after us."

"How do you know that?" Garet asked teasingly.

"Because I haven't met a monster yet who can climb ladders," Isaac retorted, pointing at a serried of ladders that rested against the uneven cliff face. "We climb those and

find the cave entrance, then go to sleep and begin again in the morning."

"If you want my opinion," said a familiar voice from above, "you plan too much and too often assume your plans are foolproof."

"We didn't want said opinion, Ivan, but I suppose such things are often given unasked-for," Garet muttered as Ivan jumped down from a tree. "And Isaac's plans have yet to fail us."

"A foolproof plan is impossible when the fool has devised the plan," Ivan said, crossing his arms and grinning.

"But who is more the fool? The fool with the plan, or the fool that follows him?" Isaac shot back, an equally sly grin on his own face.

"Now that we're all equally foolish here," Zoe cut in, "can we just find the cave entrance and get the climbing part over with?" The others stared at her for a moment, then nodded.

Isaac and Garet shoved a big rock out of the way of the first ladder and began to climb. Ivan went next, and Zoe, gritting her teeth, came last. "Don't like heights?" Ivan asked as they walked along the cliff face, backs to the sheer wall of the next cliff level. Zoe shook her head and tried not to look down.

"Well, there's a problem," Isaac said, looking at the gap in the cliff face before them, and the large rock on the other side. "I'd like to save my Psynergy, if you don't mind, Garet."

Instead of replying, Garet approached the edge of the gap and extended a hand towards the rock on the other side. The sight of the radiance surrounding him and the phantom hand grasping and moving the rock never ceased to amaze Zoe. The rock fell with a crash into the hole, and formed an almost complete path for them to walk across.

Not that Zoe enjoyed the idea.

Past the gap was a second ladder. Zoe climbed this one first, at the insistence of all the boys. "Very funny," she muttered, hauling herself up the ladder. After that first day no memories had come back to her, and though she was learning to get along without them, not knowing just what she could do was pretty annoying. And knowing that she hadn't used to do much physical work, but doing it now anyway, and by choice even, was worse.

Ivan was last, both across the gap and up the ladder. He was grateful they hadn't yet asked why he was here, but he knew it was on all their minds, even without the ability to read them. So finally he just came out and said it. "They wouldn't let me into Lunpa. The gates were shut, and they said no one else was allowed to go past them."

"Oh…I guess you can't give the Shaman's Rod to Hammet then," Zoe said casually. She was already walking ahead, wanting to get to a wider part of the cliff where she didn't feel as though she might fall at any moment.

"No, I can't. So…so I decided I'd travel with you guys."

"That's great Ivan!" Zoe could barely contain her excitement. She hadn't known him for more than a day, and she was as close to him as if he'd been her brother. *Do I*

even have a brother? she wondered. Then she laughed. "Those two can use all the help they can get."

"Not funny," Garet muttered, stepping up and shoving Zoe forward. She let out a piercing shriek as she stumbled forward, and the boys covered their ears.

"Don't you *ever* do that again, you idiot!" Zoe screamed in Garet's face. She turned angrily away and quickened her pace, wanting to get as far away from them as possible.

"Good job," Isaac said sarcastically to Garet as he passed him. Ivan nodded and gave Garet a sympathetic pat on the back, then muttered to Isaac, "She got the idiot part pretty much on the nose, didn't she?" They laughed, leaving Garet standing stunned behind them. After a moment he shook it off and continued walking.

Zoe was far ahead of them now, and she had reached what appeared to be the end of the cliff. Across a break in the ground was a large tree stump overgrown with ivy vines. Steeling herself and jumping across, Zoe landed between the stump and the cliff face behind it. Here she could see that part of the cliff face was covered with vines as well, but as she moved closer she could feel a cool breeze coming from behind the ivy. "The cave entrance," she whispered, and began to pull the ivy down with her bare hands, the tough vines cutting into her palms.

Soon enough of the vines lay on the ground for Zoe to go into the cave, but she wasn't about to go in alone. However, she was still mad at Garet, and she didn't want to go in as part of his group either. Still, her anger was fading, and she was just about to jump back across and go apologize when she heard their voices approaching. She

ducked behind the stump, then realized how close her feet were to the edge and hung onto the ivy that blanketed it for dear life.

"Would you look at that!" said Garet's voice. "Looks like Zoe's gone ahead without us. Let's go."

"One problem, brainiac," Ivan sneered. "We all can't jump across at once with that log in the way."

"He's got a point," Isaac said, stepping up to the edge of the cliff and studying the log. "C'mon Garet, let's see if we can move this stump out of the way." Garet nodded, and the two of them, using their Move Psynergy, tried to push the stump over the edge on the other side. Zoe, feeling the stump shift, tightened her grip and squeezed her eyes shut.

"It's not working," Garet said finally, sitting gratefully on a rock. "Our Psynergies aren't strong enough."

"I can help," Ivan said, and went to stand in the spot Garet had vacated. Holding out both hands and concentrating, he began to glow. The wind picked up until it threatened to yank Isaac right off the ground, and he grabbed Flint as the Djinni flew from his shoulder.

"Wind Seer's Whirlwind!" Ivan yelled, and the winds concentrated into one giant tornado-like spiral. The cyclone shot at the stump and began to rip the ivy away, throwing it everywhere and causing Isaac and Garet to shield their faces from the flying vines.

"Aaaaaiiiyaaaaaa!" Zoe screamed as the winds tossed her into the air. Torrent, who had been in the hood of her cloak, yelled also as she was thrown in a different direction.

"Zoe!" Isaac cried, seeing her go flying. "Ivan, *STOP*!!" Isaac ran up to Ivan and shoved him back, breaking his concentration and causing the winds to stop. Ivan, about to get angry, saw Zoe begin to fall and gasped.

"What's happening?" he cried, and Isaac shook his head.

"She must have been on the other side of that stump," Garet said softly, watching her fall through the air and knowing there was nothing he could do.

Zoe was falling. A quick glance down told her she would land in the river, but at the speed she was falling it would hurt as much to hit water as it would the ground. She didn't think she'd survive the fall. As she drew closer and closer to the cold rushing water below, the roar of the waterfall grew in her ears. And at last she closed her eyes and accepted her fate.

"Explorer's Flight!"

Had that been Zoe's voice? Isaac, Ivan and Garet looked up and saw her floating a few feet above the water, surrounded by the glow of her Psynergy. Slowly she floated over to where the others were standing and set herself down on the ground.

"How did you do that?" Ivan asked, amazed. "I thought you couldn't use Psynergy! That was *amazing*!!"

"Thanks, Ivan," Zoe said weakly, sitting on the rock Garet had vacated. "I'd like it better if I knew how to use it without having to face certain death first."

"Um, Zoe…" Garet said, and she looked up at him, a flash of anger crossing her eyes. "I'm sorry, for shoving you.

It *was* stupid."

"I'm not really angry, not anymore," Zoe said, grinning. "Besides, my being angry at you was the indirect cause of what just happened."

"Then you're not going to hurt me?"

"Maybe." Zoe grinned mischievously.

"Why don't I like the sound of that?" asked Flint from his position in Isaac's hands. "Isaac, let go of me! You're holding on much too tight!"

"Sorry Flint," Isaac said sheepishly.

"Hey, that's right!" Ivan said, scanning the swiftly darkening sky. "What happened to Torrent?"

"Oh no," Zoe whispered. "She…she flew…the wind took her away…I didn't see…I…" Zoe turned her head away, hiding her tears. *I'm sorry*, she thought, *I'm so sorry*.

Flint made a thoughtful sound and jumped from Isaac's hands to his head, and then made a flying leap for Garet's head. "Come off there! What are you doing?"

"I need the highest vantage point possible, and you're *tall*," Flint said indignantly. He sprung into the air, flying about three feet above Garet's head, then came back down and did it again. After doing this about five times, he jumped back onto Isaac's head and turned to Zoe. "Hello."

"What does that mean?" Ivan asked, and the Djinni grinned.

"It means I've found Torrent, or what I hope is Torrent. But…well, the 'signal' I'm getting, if you can call it that…it's very weak."

"See that, Zoe?" Ivan said encouragingly, and she turned to look at them. "Torrent's alive. Now all we have to do is find her."

"Somehow I doubt that's an easy task," Isaac rationalized. "I mean, that whirlwind threw things *everywhere*. We don't even know where to start looking."

"Great job cheering Zoe up, blockhead," Garet muttered, and Isaac blushed. "But he does have a point. So let's start here."

"Ok," Zoe said, standing. "But what if—"

"No 'what ifs.' We cross that bridge if we come to it," Ivan said determinedly. With that they split into two groups, Ivan and Zoe in one group, and Isaac, Garet and Flint in the other group. Descending the ladders, each group searched a different side of the river, looking for 'any sign of anything,' as Ivan had said.

"See anything?" Ivan asked Zoe, who shook her head. She couldn't even really think straight. What if Torrent really was…gone?

"Here's something!" Ivan called suddenly, and Zoe fought her way through the undergrowth and over to him. He was bent over something partially hidden in the leaves. He shoved the leaves and branches aside and his face fell. He was looking down at a rock. Just a rock. "Sorry, Zoe." Zoe shook her head.

"It's ok, Ivan. Let's just keep looking."

And they did. They walked their side of the river three times and came up with nothing but an assortment of scratches and scrapes courtesy of low-hanging branches and thorny weeds. "We tried," Zoe said sadly. "Tried…and failed."

"Maybe Isaac and Garet found her," Ivan said hopefully. Dejectedly they trekked back out of the trees and into the open, carefully crossing the fast-moving river at the narrowest and shallowest point. "There's no point in looking if you've already given up hope."

"I-I-I know…b-b-but I can't think…if s-s-something happened, I-I-I'd never f-f-forgive myself!" Zoe bit her lip to hold back her tears.

"Don't be upset," Ivan said, sitting on the ground next to her. "We will find her. I don't think Garet or Isaac, or me for that matter, will let us stop looking. It's all of our faults."

"Mine too."

"Yes, yours too." Ivan instantly regretted his words, thinking them too blunt. But to his surprise Zoe smiled.

"Thanks, Ivan. Anyone else would have insisted it wasn't my fault, and I would have hated that."

"Uh, sure Zoe."

A rustling in the bushes nearby caught their attention and Zoe held her breath as she saw Isaac emerge with Flint on his head, and Garet follow close behind, carrying something. Zoe looked at them hopefully, a single thought playing over and over in her mind. *Please let them have found her*.

Isaac approached them and Zoe and Ivan stood, almost pleading looks on their faces. He fought to keep the sadness from his face as he let Garet pass him. Garet looked at the ground as he handed Zoe what he'd been carrying. She let out a cry of mixed joy and anguish when she saw it was Torrent, looking the worse for wear and not moving.

"No," Ivan whispered, looking sadly up at the twilight sky. "No. It's not possible."

Flint jumped off Isaac's head and came over to Zoe, and she looked at him with tear-filled eyes, knowing he would tell her that what she feared was true.

"She's not dead," Flint told her, and at that moment Zoe could have picked him up and kissed him. "Thought you should know before you went jumping to conclusions."

"Thanks, Flint…Isaac…Garet…Ivan." Zoe looked down at Torrent again and tears sprang up once more. She fought them, and when she had control of herself she looked at them all again.

"I hope you don't mind, all of you…but I don't think I can do it alone. I mean…I was thinking that once we reached Bilibin or wherever we're going, we'd part ways, and you guys could go off on your quest, and I could try to figure out exactly where I came from, and what I can do, and where I should be going. But now I'm thinking maybe I was wrong. I won't make it on my own, not without a miracle. So, if you'll let me, I'd like to go along with you, and try to stop your enemies from lighting all the lighthouses."

"Well geez, Zoe…" Isaac said, putting a hand on her shoulder and giving her a friendly smile. "You didn't think we'd actually let you go off by yourself, did you? We *need*

you, Zoe! And, well…you're a nice person to have around. You're a good friend."

"And besides," Garet added, grinning at her, "you're the first girl since Jenna who's been able to put me in m place and leave me speechless."

"And *that* is a feat indeed!" Flint said good-naturedly, beginning to laugh. Soon they all were laughing, and Garet used his Psynergy to make a fire while the others readied themselves for the night.

"Are we really going to go through Goma Cave first thing tomorrow?" Ivan asked, and Isaac nodded.

"The sooner we reach Bilibin, the better. For all of us," Isaac added, glancing over at Zoe, who was drawing by the light of the fire.

"I wonder what lives under the mountains."

"Things we probably won't like meeting. But Goma Cave is used by anyone who travels, unless they're thickheaded and arrogant enough to think they can cross the mountains themselves. It should be light inside, and a path should be clearly visible."

"I'm not sure I won't be more of a hurt than a help."

"Oh, come off it, Ivan. Size isn't everything. Jenna was small, and she was the fastest thing…smarter than Garet too, though that doesn't take much," Isaac added, winking. Ivan laughed, then, as his eyes caught sight of Zoe, who had stopped drawing and was staring listlessly off into the night, his smile faded.

"Flint was telling the truth, right?"

"Of *course* he was. He wouldn't lie about that. In fact I doubt he'd lie about anything."

"What's Zoe going to do? I mean…she can't *carry* Torrent all the way through Goma Cave. 'Least I don't *think* she can."

"It would be hard. We'll have to fight our way through, most likely."

"That meant you have no other solution, right?"

Isaac grinned and ruffled Ivan's hair. "You catch on quick. Now go to sleep. I think Garet and Zoe have beat us to it."

Ivan ran a hand through his hair, then lay down and in moments was asleep. Isaac did much the same, though he did give Garet a good punch for snoring. But Zoe, silent as she was, was not sleeping.

Instead her gaze was riveted on the small, still form of Torrent. Torrent, who had put Zoe first that day…it felt like so long ago, but it was only a week before…that day in the forest. "Back then I didn't know," Zoe whispered into the night. "If I had known, maybe I'd have stayed in Vault."

"But then you wouldn't have Psynergy," came the whispered reply.

"Torrent?"

"Well, at least it's not my ghost talking to you."

"What happened?"

"The same thing that happened to you, only I didn't have Psynergy to stop my fall."

"You *saw*?"

"I went much higher than you did, and you weigh more, and fell faster. Now go to sleep."

"I can't sleep! You might…"

"Come off it. Nothing's going to happen to me," Torrent said more gently. "But something's gonna happen to you if you don't sleep!"

"Alright, alright, I get the picture!" Zoe said, laughing, and rolled over and closed her eyes.

It was only when he was positive that Zoe was asleep that Flint crept out from his hiding spot and sighed. He'd have to tell Zoe what he'd done, but that could wait until morning. For now, he could pretend that it really *had* been Torrent's voice. Looking sadly down at the Mercury Djinni, he sighed and scurried back over to where Isaac lay, curling up beside him and falling asleep.

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By my unknown methods of calculation, this is a *long* chapter, and I guess they don't get to go through Goma Cave until Chapter Eight. Oh well. More incentive to read and review, right?

Phoenix: that's what she *hopes*.

Vil: *shoves alter ego away from puter* I didn't bring you here! But, to my esteemed audience, REEEEEEVIIIIEEEEWWWW!!!

II

II

II

V

Chapter 9: Chapter Eight: Goma Cave

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Ok, this is *definitely* the Goma Cave chapter. And I honestly don't know right now whether or not they'll be out of Goma Cave by the end of the chapter. But I *do* know that Garet's not gonna be having much fun in this here cave. So, now, onto the story!

Chapter Eight: Goma Cave (for lack of a creative title)

"Get offa my head!" Garet cried, trying to pry the Djinni from his hair. "Ouch! Flint, let *go* of my hair!"

"Yeah, Flint, get off his head before you mess up his hair any more than it is already," Isaac said with a laugh. "If it's even possible."

"Good point," Ivan said, as he pulled on his other boot. "Oh, I can't *wait* to go traipsing through the half-concealed paths of Goma Cave," he went on, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Anyone else feel like we're being watched?" Zoe asked, securing her braid with her hair band.

"Not really," Ivan said as he looked up at her. "Why?"

"Well…last night, I could have sworn that Torrent was awake and talking, but this morning…"

"Despite being in a bad position to act superior," Isaac said from where he was sitting cleaning off the blade of his

sword, "I can pretty much be positive when I say that there's no way that was Torrent talking to you."

"And exactly *how* do you know that?" Garet asked, his hands now inexplicably tangled in his hair. Flint, satisfied, jumped off Garet's head and onto his shoulder. Garet, unable to move his hands, could only grumble at the Djinni.

Isaac looked at Garet steadily and calmly raised one eyebrow. "How do you think I know?"

"You sure you're a Venus Adept, Isaac?" Ivan asked with a grin. "You're starting to sound a lot like me."

"Elements help me, not that!" Isaac said with mock sincerity, and Ivan shot a tiny lightning zap at him. "Hey! No fair! What do I look like, a slime?"

"Do you *really* want me to answer you?" Zoe asked, gently picking up her pack and settling it on her back.

"Good one, Zoe," Garet muttered. "Now could someone please help me here?!"

"You want I should zap his head?" Ivan asked, expression innocent.

"Ack! Stop talking like that, Ivan!" Garet finally untangled his hands from his hair and sighed.

"Let's get going, guys," Isaac said, and Flint hopped over onto his shoulder. "While we've still got daylight."

"How absurd," Flint muttered. "It's eight in the morning."

"The cave is big," Zoe reasoned. "Has to be. Nothing that cuts through a mountain range is small."

"We've had this conversation before," Isaac said, walking ahead of the others. Zoe quickly caught him, however, preferring his calm silence to Ivan and Garet's ongoing argument about frying Garet's hair.

"Come on! Then you'd *really* look like a Fire Adept!" Ivan begged teasingly.

"Shut *up*!" Garet growled, annoyed.

Zoe rolled her eyes, glancing over at Isaac, who shrugged. Zoe did a double take when she saw Flint staring at her. "You looking for something, Flint?"

"Well, yes, that and one other thing," the Djinni replied hesitantly. "But first things first I suppose. I'm looking for Torrent."

"She's in here," Zoe mumbled, gesturing with her head to her pack. "What else did you want?"

"I wanted to apologize."

"For what? As far as I know, you're the only one who's blameless in the whole affair."

"For doing what I did last night."

"Last night? You mean…that was *your* voice I heard?"

"Well, yes."

"In that case, I only have one question." Zoe's voice wasn't happy. But then, Flint reasoned, it wasn't angry either. He might as well go for it.

"What is it?"

"Why, Flint?"

"I…I didn't want you to lose sleep over it, partly. I knew you'd be up all night if I didn't do *something*. And…the other part is…I didn't want you to be in pain, inside, thinking it was all your fault and that it could only get worse."

"Thanks then, Flint," Zoe said, smiling at the Djinni. Isaac looked at her then and smiled back.

"You never know. You might be able to do something about it," Isaac said cryptically.

"Sometimes I think you say things like that just to confuse me."

"And sometimes, I do. But this time I'm serious. Who knows what other Psynergy you have. But judging from what I've seen, you're a Jupiter Adept. I think. Maybe. Oh, ok, I don't really know, but any guess I make has a twenty-five percent chance of being right."

"And a seventy-five percent chance of being wrong."

"Pessimist."

"Optimist."

"This sounds better than *our* argument," Ivan said dryly.

"Anything sounds better than Psynergy-cooking my head," Garet countered, giving Ivan a friendly punch on the shoulder.

"Not your entire head. Fried air might explode."

"Ivan ol' buddy?"

"Yeah Garet?"

"Shut up."

"Sure thing. We're already at the cave entrance anyway." And they were. Zoe and Isaac were on either side of the door, peering into the darkness.

"There are torches," Isaac said without turning around. "It's not pitch black. But I don't like some of the things I'm hearing in there. Things that sound like they're going to hurt if they hit us."

"Good description," Ivan said with a nod. "We'll just have to take 'em down."

"You're confident," Zoe said, glancing at the ground and back up again. "But you have a point. We'll just…cross that bridge if we come to it." With that Zoe took the first step into the damp, dark cavern.

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After two hours of climbing up and down rocks, dodging and fighting off trolls and Will Heads, and straining to see in the half-light of the cave, even Isaac was ready to stop for a rest. He stopped and leaned against a pillar, the others sitting in various positions on the ground.

"Man, I never expected it to be this much hard work," Ivan muttered, squinting in the dimness at a long scratch on his arm. "Shoot. I *hate* caves. Too many rocks."

"Well it's not like we had any other choiack!" Isaac cried as the pillar he was leaning on began to move.

"Choiack? That's a new one," Zoe muttered. "What is it, a kind of food?"

"Pillars don't usually move unless there's a reason," Isaac mused. "I wonder why this one moves."

"Well, look up there," Garet said, pointing. "This pillar forms a link between that side of the gap, and the other side. If we can figure out a way up there, I bet we can jump across."

"Big emphasis on the 'if,'" Ivan added. "There're some stairs over there," he went on, pointing to his left. "We could try those."

"Genius, those are the stairs we just came *down*," Garet said, rolling his eyes.

"I think Ivan's right, though," Zoe said. "I saw another path before we came down here, but I really didn't feel like saying anything. Those trolls are killers, literally."

"That reminds me," Isaac began, but Zoe held up a hand.

"Save it. Let's just get out of this slime-infested cave."

"Ok then. Come on, let's go see if that pillar did anything to help us." Isaac turned and headed for the stairs. Zoe and Ivan followed quickly, and Garet brought up the rear, mumbling something about rests and stupid rocks.

I honestly prefer going down stairs to going up them, Ivan thought as he dragged himself up the last step.

Squinting off to his right, he could barely see the path Zoe had been talking about. As they got closer, he could make out another set of stairs.

"Why me?" Garet muttered, keeping one hand on his sword hilt as he went first down the stairs.

"Because you're bigger than I am," Ivan said from behind him. He was clutching the Shaman's Rod tightly with both hands, not liking the lack of visibility the deeper they went into the cave.

At the bottom of the stairs they found themselves on a sort of platform. "Look!" Zoe said, pointing. The pillar Isaac had 'moved' did indeed make the large gap into two smaller ones suitable for jumping across. And when Garet saw what was on the other side of the drop, he immediately stopped complaining about going first.

"A Mars Djinni! Look! Over there!" he cried in excitement, leaping onto the top of the pillar and nearly losing his balance.

"And you call yourself 'adept,'" Isaac taunted, following Garet across. Ivan went next, and Zoe came last. She kept casting worried glances over her shoulder, but when Ivan looked back there was nothing there.

"Well, Garet, what are you waiting for?" Isaac said, a sly grin on his face. "Go get your Djinni."

"It wants a fight," Garet muttered, drawing his sword. "It won't come like Flint did."

"How do you know?" Ivan asked.

"It's just a feeling, I guess."

"It could be the way it's standing there like it's going to set Garet's head on fire," Zoe commented, knowing that the thought made Garet squirm. "But then I could be wrong."

"Flint?" Isaac asked the Djinni, who was currently sitting on his head.

"Yeah Isaac?"

"Get ready to summon something, would ya?"

"Sure thing buddy." Flint glowed for a moment, then nodded. "All set."

"Ok then, let's do this," Garet said, approaching the Djinni. Zoe, Isaac and Ivan, weapons ready, formed a semicircle behind him. "Mars Djinni!" Garet called, and the Djinni came at him at a run.

Swiping at it with his sword, Garet was thrown off-balance when the Djinni easily dodged his blow. It landed on Garet's head and shouted something that none of the adepts could understand. But Isaac knew it wasn't good when fire began to rain down on Garet, burning him and singeing his hair.

"Wind Seer's Ray!" Ivan cried, and a bolt of lightning struck the Djinni, hurling it against the opposite wall.

"Guard's Flare!" Garet yelled, and fire shot from his hand and hit the stunned Djinni, but it shook off the attack as though it hadn't even felt it. "Shoot, I forgot! Fire Djinn are immune to fire Psynergy!"

"Then move over so you're not in my way!" Isaac said, and Garet rolled aside as Isaac brought his hands together in front of him. "I summon the spirit of Venus, power of the

Earth!" Flint rose from Isaac's head and became a ball of golden light that dove on the Mars Djinni. But still the Djinni didn't seem very affected.

"These attacks aren't working," Ivan surmised as the Djinni shot another blast at Garet's head. The Mars Adept ducked just in time, and instead the blast headed for Zoe.

"Look out!" Garet called, and Zoe dodged quickly, the streak of fire going harmlessly past. Glaring at the Mars Djinni, Zoe was about to call on her Psynergy when she felt her actions taken over by some other force.

Not completely understanding, Zoe's hands came together in front of her face and she closed her eyes. "I summon the spirit of Mercury, power of the Water!" she yelled, flinging both hands into the air, and a blue streak shot from her pack and hovered in the air in front of the Mars Djinni. The glowing blue ball hit the Djinni and surrounded it. With a blinding flash, the blue glow disappeared, and a familiar form appeared on Zoe's shoulder.

"Torrent!" Zoe cried happily, holding the Djinni in both hands and resisting the urge to hug her so tightly that she wouldn't be able to breathe.

A sudden orange flash caught Zoe's attention, and she looked back at the Mars Djinni. It was dissolving into flames, and those flames shot into the air and surrounded Garet, disappearing. Almost instantly the Mars Djinni appeared on his shoulder.

"Hey! Check it out! I've got a Djinni!" Garet said happily, and Ivan held back laughter at the thought of what Garet would look like jumping up and down with joy.

"Hello," the Djinni said, its blue eyes catching the wavering torchlight and reflecting it, making them shine. "I am Forge, a Mars Djinni, bound to the power of Fire."

"We figured out the 'Mars Djinni' part a while ago," Ivan commented, causing the others to laugh. The sound of laughter so close to her right ear made Zoe remember, and she pulled Torrent off her shoulder again and held her out, spinning around happily.

"Well would you look at that," Isaac said, shaking his head slowly. "I'd expected pretty much anything other than what just happened."

"One must expect the unexpected," Ivan said, folding his arms, closing his eyes, and scowling, and he sounded so serious and sage-like that they couldn't help but laugh.

"Here's a question, then," Flint said, looking curiously at Ivan. "If the unexpected is to be expected, that would make it expected, and therefore unexpected would not exist. If you were to expect things further unexpected, then they also would be expected, and your theory would be fighting itself."

"Do you *like* confusing people, Flint?" Isaac asked as he walked back over to the edge of the platform and hopped back across. "That blew even *me* away."

"It's a hobby," Flint replied, all innocence. Isaac rolled his eyes and waited for the others to make the jump back across the pillar.

When they were all back on the same side again, they went back up the stairs and kept moving, each of them silently retracing their steps in their minds, wondering just how they were going to get out of the cave.

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"Isaac, duck!" Garet called, and Isaac, who had been walking backwards, ducked and covered his head. The troll's axe swung and passed over Isaac with inches to spare. He could feel the wind of it.

"Thanks, Garet," Isaac said, whirling to face the troll and barely bringing his sword up in time to block another swing. "A little help here!"

"Any ideas?" Garet asked Ivan as Zoe ran at the troll, waving the Bandit's Sword.

"No good ones," Ivan answered, and held the Shaman's Rod high. Garet sighed and drew his sword as well, and they ran up beside Isaac, the troll's axe barely missing Garet's head.

"What is it with the things we fight and my hair?!" Garet complained as he slashed at the troll, leaving one of its arms useless. "Oh yeah!"

"Nice one Garet. But please, don't get cocky or you won't have a head for them to attack!" Zoe yelled, and Garet stepped back, barely avoiding yet another axe swing. Ivan, in an awesome display of exactly what Jupiter adepts could do, jumped *over* the swinging axe as it passed him. Zoe was far enough back that it didn't even come close to her, but Isaac didn't even see it coming.

"Isaac! Look *out*!!" Ivan yelled, and Isaac turned his head and gasped, jumping aside, but the very end of one of the edges of the axe cut into his shoulder, and he yelped and fell against the wall. The troll let out a roar of satisfaction, and it echoed off the walls of the cave, making Ivan drop the Shaman's Rod and cover his ears.

"Oh no you don't!" Zoe yelled as she saw the troll swing at Ivan. Planting her feet in front of Ivan she closed her eyes and called on the force that she now knew was Psynergy. "Explorer's Storm!" she called, hand aimed at the ceiling. A blast of electrified water slammed into the troll, and it stumbled back, dropping its axe. Ivan and Garet's eyes were wide as they saw for the first time Zoe's Psynergy attack.

"Don't just stand there!" she called back to them, and Garet nodded. Placing his hands together in front of him, he fixed an iron glare on the troll and smirked.

"I summon the spirit of Mars, power of the Fire!" Forge jumped from Garet's shoulder and became a spinning ball of fire, and the power of Mars descended on the troll, defeating it, and it disintegrated. "Cool attack, Forge," Garet said, grinning at the Djinni.

"Doesn't help that it's my *only* attack," the Djinni muttered, and Garet laughed. But his face turned suddenly serious as he caught sight of Isaac slumped on the ground. "Isaac," he muttered, and hurried over to where Zoe and Ivan had already knelt beside him. "Isaac, are you ok?"

"Define ok," Isaac said through clenched teeth. "And then maybe I can answer you." He bit his lip and held tight to his arm where the axe had hit him. "But my answer is most likely a 'no.'"

"Can you make it out of here?" Ivan asked, glancing around behind them. Who knew what that troll's roar had attracted.

"I don't know."

"Bad answer," Garet said, prying Isaac's hand away from his shoulder and gasping. "Great fire spirits, Isaac! Learn to duck faster!" Zoe, upon following Garet's gaze, silently agreed. It *did* look pretty bad.

"I take that's your way of telling me I shouldn't look," Isaac shot back, grimacing. "Shoot. Forgot to 'go shopping' in Vault. I don't have anything that might help."

"Then we do it the old fashioned way," Garet said, sounding far too cheerful in light of the situation. Zoe looked up at him, puzzled. Ivan was about to ask Garet what he meant when he heard a noise off to his right and, whirling, squinted into the darkness.

"We've got company," he told the others, turning to look at them and catching Zoe's eye. Zoe nodded and stood, telling Garet that they'd handle it, and he grumbled a bit but nodded anyway. Zoe came to stand next to Ivan, who raised the Shaman's Rod and stood ready, though trembling just a little. Out of the shadows came a slime, followed by a zombie.

"Any ideas on how to beat them?" Zoe asked Ivan, who grinned.

"That's the idea," Ivan said, whacking the slime with the Shaman's Rod. "Beat them senseless!" Zoe shrugged and drew her sword, and with a yell began to whack the zombie with it, narrowly avoiding most of its attacks. Those that did hit did nothing serious, and the zombie soon lay stunned on the ground. Zoe felt immensely proud of herself for defeating the zombie all on her own as she drove the Bandit's Sword through it, killing it. Ivan was having similar luck with the slime, zapping it finally with a low-key version of his Ray.

"Well, that was…interesting," Garet said, and Zoe got the impression that he'd seen their fight. "But a nice tactic. I'll have to try it sometime."

"I don't know whether to thank you or beat *you* senseless!" Ivan grumbled. Then, remembering, the look on his face changed from one of mock anger to one of worry. "Isaac?"

"Still here," came the weak reply.

"Are we going on, or staying here?" Zoe asked, not much liking the idea of either.

"We can go," Isaac said, struggling to stand. Zoe hesitated for only a moment, then helped him up and let him lean on her. Garet frowned, but, after looking from Ivan to Isaac and Zoe to himself and back to Ivan, it was like a light bulb in his head went on and he sighed.

"The one disadvantage to being too tall," he said, and Ivan added, "And the one disadvantage to being too short." Without saying another word, the four began to trudge on tiredly, with Flint and Forge both hitching rides on Garet's shoulders. Torrent did a strange thing however. Standing on Isaac's head, the Djinni closed her eyes and began to glow a strange blue color. Zoe, after seeing that it didn't bother Isaac, shrugged it off.

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"Move you stupid stump!" Garet cried, frustrated. His Psynergy was running out, he knew. Soon he wouldn't be able to use it at all. But the stump was blocking their way and this was the only way to get it to move. "Come on! MOVE!" His shout echoed in the cave, but right now he didn't care. Zoe was practically dragging Isaac along by

now; in fact, Garet wasn't sure if Isaac was even conscious anymore. And Ivan just looked worn out. Garet had begun to regret his promise to take over for Isaac as the leader should anything happen. But remembering his promise only furthered his resolve to get them all out of here alive, and in less than two pieces each.

Finally the stump fell over the edge of the platform and into the river that flowed through the center of the cave, and Garet sighed with relief. Jumping across, he looked back to see Zoe make the jump just barely, teetering dangerously backwards as she tried to support both Isaac's weight and her own. To Garet's relief, she caught her balance and slowly moved out of Ivan's way so he could jump across. The worn out Jupiter Adept gave himself a running start and leapt, but landed wrong and stumbled forward, rolling dangerously close to the other edge of the platform. Garet reached out and grabbed a handful of Ivan's shirt, stopping him from rolling right over the edge and into the water.

"Thanks Garet," Ivan mumbled tiredly. Garet only nodded and hauled Ivan to his feet.

"Yet another reason why we should high-tail it outta here," he said, more to himself than to anyone else. Slowly, almost too slowly for Garet's liking, they made their way forward. Through a doorway, they emerged into a significantly lighter and warmer cavern, and a bridge led across the river to a light-filled doorway, which was obviously the way out.

"We're almost out," Ivan said, though it was more of a sigh of relief. A sound behind them caught his ears, and he turned to see yet another axe-waving troll fast approaching them. "Garet! Zoe! Troll!" Turning, Garet could have yelled in

frustration at seeing the troll. They were too tired to fight anything else, he knew. But did they have any other choice?

"RUN!" Zoe yelled, quickening her pace despite the extra weight. "Over the bridge!" Garet hurried after her, and Ivan, with one last glance at the troll behind them, brought up the rear. After what seemed like hours but was really only a few minutes, the four passed through the door and were out of Goma Cave. Bilibin was clearly visible about a mile and a half away. The sun was low in the sky, but not yet truly setting.

They hadn't gone more than ten yards when Ivan collapsed on the ground. Zoe heard him fall and looked back over her shoulder, but she knew she couldn't half-carry Ivan as well. Garet obviously knew this too, as he had pulled Ivan to his feet and shaken him awake again. "Almost there," he muttered, and Ivan nodded slowly and continued walking.

Half an hour later, they reached Bilibin.

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Vil: thought that was the end, did you? Oh, no, there's more to come yet in this chapter. *evil cackle*

Kaede: Just ONE question.

Vil: Hmm?

Kaede: WHY Isaac?

Vil: dramatic tension. Now go *havo* so I can write the rest of this chapter!

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"Shooed out of my own room," Garet muttered angrily later that night. He sat with Zoe and Ivan at a table in the eating area of the Inn in Bilibin. The three of them were falling asleep where they sat, or they would have been, if not for the Djinn's constant half-argument.

"How high d'you think it'd have to be?" Forge asked sleepily.

"Taller than *you*," Torrent offered. Flint was mysteriously silent, unusual for him.

"Lots of things are taller than I am," Forge argued. "Give me a better example."

"Can I ask just what you're trying to determine the height of here?" Zoe inquired, looking at the Djinn.

"How tall would a ladder have to be to reach the top of Mercury Lighthouse," Torrent said smugly.

"Oh. Sorry I asked," Zoe muttered, a frightening image of herself swaying on a ladder the reached the sky crossing her mind. She shuddered.

"Go to bed," said a voice behind them, and the three turned to face the owner of the voice and found the Innkeeper staring them down. Slowly and rather painfully the three rose and hauled themselves up the stairs. Garet knocked on the door of his room, got no reply, and opened it, sighing with relief at whatever it was he saw, and walked in, closing the door tight.

Ivan and Zoe were sharing the other room. Ivan collapsed into his bed and was asleep immediately. Zoe wanted to do much the same, but decided a bath first might be better.

Fifteen minutes later, Zoe fell into bed as well, and in minutes was sound asleep.

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Vil: end of chapter eight. On a late note: I hereby dedicate this chapter to MoonRanger (hiya tel!)

Kaede: for clarity, exactly which scene did you cut out back there when we started talking?

Vil: Basically it was just Garet telling Ivan to go for help, and Ivan coming back and Garet being kicked out of the room he shared with Isaac until said help left.

Kaede: Ah. And you cut this out because?

Vil: Don't you think it's long enough already?!
Kaede: Point taken. And what will chapter nine be?

Vil: Erm…the Bilibin chapter, as far as I can follow.

Kae: ok, sure. So, guys, review review review as usual.

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Chapter 10: Chapter Nine: Djinn In Bilibin

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Thought I'd say a few things to my reviewers, but as I'm upstairs and ff.net is downstairs, I cant remember who said what, so I'm gonna set it all straight.

A) I know very well exactly what Djinn can do. I had a plan to incorporate that into this very chapter, actually. And, if Torrent was unconscious then she couldn't very well do anything, and Zoe holds her weapon with two hands, making it impossible for her to carry something and fight at the same time.

B) I'm trying to deviate from the storyline as much as possible without wrecking the entire story. And

C) After this got deleted by my very evil computer once, I'm frustrated, so I might come off as harsh, but I'm not trying to be. That's Kaede's job ;). So now to continue.

Chapter Nine: Djinn In Bilibin (as far as I can tell, this rhymes)

Ivan was up early. The sun was up, but only just, and as far as he could tell no one else was awake. Since he knew breakfast wouldn't be ready for a while, he decided to look around town. Then he looked at himself and made a face. Inside the cave it had been dark enough not to have to look at how dirty he'd gotten.

After a quick bath, Ivan quietly went down the stairs and walked outside.

"Hmm. It's cool out this morning," Ivan mused as he walked, and became so lost in thought that he almost walked into a large golden statue of a woman that was in the center of the town.

Standing near the statue, he thought he could feel a cool breeze coming from somewhere. *But that can't be*, he thought as he located the source of the wind. *Air doesn't blow from* under *statues*.

"Unless," he said aloud, and experimentally pushed the statue. It slid back rather easily, revealing a ladder descending into the ground. "Wonderful. Another ladder." Ivan rolled his eyes and began the climb down.

At the bottom of the ladder was a large sign that said, 'McCoy's Hidden Warehouse. Do Not Enter!' "A little late for that," Ivan commented, smiling. The small cavern he was in seemed half-full of water, so that he had to jump the gap between dry areas. The strip he stood on now had another golden statue at the end of it. It would be easy to reach either of the two dry areas on the sides once the statue was moved.

"This should be easy. It's just like the one above the ladder, only I'll have to pull it." Grinning, he wrapped his arms around the statue and tugged, expecting the statue to slide right out of the way.

Nothing happened.

"Ack! This is *heavy!*" Ivan moaned, pulling again with all his strength. But the statue failed to move. Glaring at it, Ivan gave one final, all-out pull. The statue shifted quickly, and Ivan stumbled back, landing hard and doing a backwards roll, then coming to a dizzy stop. Holding his

head and sitting up, Ivan now saw a definite problem. He couldn't get around the statue.

"All that shoving for nothing," he said miserably. Then a thought occurred to him. Whoever this 'McCoy' was obviously couldn't get around this statue either. So there had to be another way in. Climbing back up the ladder, Ivan looked around for anything that might help him find the second entrance. Seeing stairs, he decided that was a likely place to start, though after yesterday stairs were *not* his idea of a good time. He climbed them anyway and found himself on a ledge surrounding the town. Walking along it was pleasant to say the least, as up there the winds were stronger and whipped Ivan's hair and clothes about.

Eventually he found himself walking across the top of the wooden 'gate' that was the entrance to the town. Now on the other side, set into the wall he could see some hanging vines, and he smirked. "Secret entrance ha."

Approaching the vines, he held his hand toward them. "Whirlwind!" A small-scale tornado appeared and blew the vines away, leaving the opening visible. Descending the stairs with a defeated sigh, Ivan now found his way clear and, using the speed of a Jupiter Adept, quickly hopped across the spots of dry land and over to the other side.

"Maybe I'll find a cool sword!" he said excitedly, the thought never crossing his mind that he might not like what he found. "Or some decent armor, or treasure, or…" he trailed off as his eyes caught sight of what was waiting for him around the corner. Grinning widely, he cried, "A Djinni!" At those words the Djinni before him dissolved into swirling winds, which surrounded him. He felt something change inside him, and smiled when the Jupiter Djinni appeared on his shoulder.

"I am Gust, Jupiter Djinni, bound to the power of the Wind," she said, jumping up and down a few times. "And *you* are Ivan, Jupiter Adept, master of the powers of the Wind."

Ivan blushed. "I'm not a *master* of the wind. But I am a Jupiter Adept…how did you know?"

"You don't know about the bonds between Djinn and their partners?"

"Should I?" Ivan asked as he climbed the steps out of the 'secret entrance.'

"Yes you should! All of your companions have Djinn! Don't they know? Oh, that's a silly question, they must know something, but do they know exactly what we can do?"

"Doubt it. Maybe Isaac knows about Flint. But…what exactly *can* you do?"

"Better I should explain it to all of you at once. But before we go any further, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do all adepts talk to themselves, or is that just Jupiter Adepts, or is that just you? That's a sign of insanity, you know."

Instead of answering, Ivan laughed.

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Zoe was halfway finished with breakfast by the time Ivan returned. Eagerly, he filled a plate with food and sat across from Zoe, who smirked at him.

"You're late," she said, a mocking glare in her eyes. "Where did you go?"

"Looking around a bit. Found a cave." Ivan paused, taking huge bites of his food, swallowed, then went on. "Found a Djinni in said cave."

"You did? What does it look like?"

"I," Gust said, appearing out of nowhere in a flash of violet light, "look like this. I'm a Jupiter Djinni called Gust."

"How did you do that?" Zoe asked, amazed. She was *positive* Torrent couldn't do things like that. "Is that a Jupiter Djinni trick?"

"No. It's a Djinni trick period."

"What?"

"Long story," Ivan said, finishing his food. "Maybe you should tell us now, Gust."

"Alright. First things first—we feel what you feel. If, for example, you're tired, then any Djinn joined with you will be tired as well. The same works with emotions. If you are, for instance, very excited, all your Djinn will be excited too. Also, all Djinn can disappear and reappear at will. Well, when they're joined with a person and they disappear, they sort of become a part of that person, but I don't want to get technical."

"Oh no, we wouldn't want *that*," Ivan said sarcastically. Gust shot him a glare but continued.

"We can speak in your minds too. Well, Jupiter Djinn can at any rate, but I'm pretty sure it's the same for all

Djinn. And, as a final and rather depressing note, if you die, so do we."

"So technically," Zoe said with a grin, "Djinn can't die unless the one they are bound to dies?"

"Well…not exactly. Djinn can still die, but their doing so won't affect you…not physically at least."

"And Torrent never told me this why?" Zoe asked, looking up at the ceiling. Gust snorted.

"Mercury Djinn. Think they're so superior to all us other Djinn just because they're Mercury Djinn!" At those words Torrent appeared on Zoe's shoulder, and Gust looked down sheepishly.

"Know-it-all Jupiter Djinni," Torrent shot back, then looked up at Zoe. "The need never arose to tell you, and I was perfectly fine with staying visible. As for speaking in your mind, yes, I *can* do it, but I never really needed to. I'm pretty sure Flint has told Isaac these things, but I'm positive Garet doesn't know."

"Where is ol' fire-head anyway? Hiding from me and my zapping power?" Ivan laughed.

"He *is* late for breakfast, and from what I've seen it's not like him to sleep in, or to skip meals." Zoe leaned her head on her hand thoughtfully. "But then, yesterday was pretty…exhausting."

"Today's about to be even more so," Torrent said, glancing out the window. "If my memory serves me correctly, *you* need some practice, Zoe. And you too, Ivan."

"But my sword would cut through his Shaman's Rod," Zoe protested, in truth not wanting to tire herself out again. "Really, I want to look around town, maybe find something useful in one of the shops."

"I want to check out that weird tree I saw at the entrance. I swear it looked almost human. But maybe we should wait for Garet?" Ivan frowned. "He sure is taking a long time getting up and ready."

"Let's just go do our own things today," Zoe said. "If Garet wants one of us, it won't be hard for him to find us. It's a small town as far as I can tell. Let's meet back here for lunch."

"Ok," chorused three voices, and Ivan, Zoe and their Djinn left the Inn, nodded to each other and split ways, Zoe heading right and Ivan heading straight.

****

"I wonder if Garet'll *ever* come out," Zoe mused as she looked up at the sign on the door of one of the shops. "Torrent?" she asked, and the Djinni appeared on her shoulder in a flash of blue light, startling her. Zoe didn't think she'd ever get used to that. "Where are we?"

"It's a weapons shop," Torrent said, studying the symbol on the sign. "I'm not sure you need a weapon. The one you've got is good enough, right?"

"It is for now."

"For now. Sure. Like you could lift anything heavier."

"Why you little!"

"But it's true, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but that doesn't meant you rub my face in it."

"Would you rather I rub Ivan's face in it? Though rubbing one's face into a sword might not be the best idea." Torrent smiled, and Zoe laughed. By this time they had reached a different shop, this one built into the cliff face. "The sign on this one is that of a store for traveler's gear. You might want to go in there, actually. Many useful things are in there. Many useful things."

"Alright then. After getting those coins from the mayor in Vault, I feel almost rich." Zoe pushed open the door and walked inside. The shop was lit by burning lanterns and a fire in the back.

"Hello," said the woman at the desk, giving Zoe a friendly smile. "Is there anything specific you're looking for?"

"Well…I'm kinda new around here. I'm not sure what anything's for."

"Alright then. We carry four basic items here. Herbs, antidotes, elixirs, and sacred feathers." Quickly the clerk explained to Zoe exactly what each thing did, and Zoe paused a moment, thoughtful. Torrent had by now disappeared, and Zoe knew the Djinni's incessant popping into and out of visibility wouldn't be something she adjusted to quickly. After a moment she made her purchase, paid the woman and left the store, smiling and humming a little. For some reason she was suddenly in ridiculously high spirits.

Ivan chose that moment to come running up to her, out of breath and very excited. "What is it Ivan?" she asked,

a puzzled frown appearing on her face. Instead of answering, Ivan grabbed her wrist and dragged her to the entrance gate where a small tree stood.

"Really Ivan, I don't see…" Zoe started, but trailed off as Ivan cast his Mind Read Psynergy on the tree, still clutching Zoe's wrist. Zoe's eyes widened when she actually picked up thoughts from the tree. *Trees don't think*, she scolded herself. Then she remembered Ivan's words from earlier.

"I want to check out that weird tree I saw at the entrance. I swear it looked almost human."

"Ivan, you don't think…"

"I do. I'm almost sure of it. This tree used to be a man. But I don't think it has anything to do with the lighthouse we're looking for…too bad. I'd like to know what's going on that makes people turn into trees."

"Speaking of the lighthouse," Gust said, popping up on Ivan's head, "wasn't it supposed to be near here?"

"You'll be looking for the Mercury Lighthouse, then?" asked a voice behind them, and they turned to find a man whose face was partially covered by a cloth.

"We don't know for sure. Is that the lighthouse close to here?" Ivan asked, feeling dwarfed by the tall man.

"Nearer than any of the others. The Mercury Lighthouse lies to the north of Imil." Ivan turned to Zoe then, and she caught the look in his eyes. He wouldn't be too affected by the cold, but he knew Garet would, and the thought made him grin. Turning back to ask the man how to get to Imil, Ivan found that he was gone.

"Now that's odd," Gust said aloud, taking the words right from Ivan's head. "But is it just me or is it time for lunch? Now, that's a silly question. Of course it's time for lunch, if I'm hungry."

"Tell me one thing Gust," Ivan said, a playful light in his eyes.

"Sure."

"Do all Djinn talk to themselves? Or is it just Jupiter Djinn? Or is it just you? That's a sign of insanity, you know."

"You stole my line."

"You bet." At those words, all four of them exploded with laughter.

****

Garet had barely slept the night before. He couldn't. Something was stopping him. And he had skipped breakfast as well, and wouldn't be going down to lunch. He knew he was hungry, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the room. Not with Isaac looking so pale and…Garet shook his head. He would *not* think like that about his best friend.

Forge looked up at Garet and sighed. He felt all the emotions that Garet did, after all, and didn't like it much at the moment. Of course, the Djinni had his own worries, watching Flint being the main one. The Venus Djinni was as still and silent as the adept he had joined.

The sound of the door opening startled them both, and Garet fumbled with a smile when he saw Zoe enter. "Ivan's saving a table for us," she said quietly. "We waited for you this morning, but you never came down, did you?"

Garet shook his head, glancing over at Isaac again. Zoe put a hand on the Fire Adept's shoulder. "What did they say yesterday?"

"They said he wouldn't be up for at least a day," Garet said, meeting Zoe's level gaze. "But that he'd be alright, eventually."

"Do you trust their judgment?" Zoe asked evenly. Garet's mind took him back to Vale for a moment, to an old friend of his. Best Mercury Adept he'd ever know. She had had the same kind of calming voice and serious eyes, though hers had been deep blue like Isaac's, not striking violet like Zoe's.

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing up here all morning? Come on down to lunch with us. It's stupid to skip a meal."

"You sure have an odd way of trying to cheer people up," Garet said, standing. "Forge, stay here."

"Will do, captain," the Djinni said, bringing himself up straight and looking very professional. The sight of this startled a laugh from Garet, and behind him Zoe smiled warmly at the Mars Djinni, who winked at her. Garet rolled his eyes and followed Zoe down the stairs, where Ivan was grinning at the Jupiter Djinni on his shoulder.

"Ivan! Where did you get that thing?!" Garet asked, astonished, and Ivan smirked.

"Under the town," he replied, and Gust giggled. "Though earth isn't really my specialty…anything for a Jupiter Djinni."

"There are some things you should know about Djinn," Gust added, and proceeded to explain all to Garet while he, Ivan and Zoe ate. Garet almost choked when Torrent flashed into visibility on Zoe's shoulder, and the others could barely contain their laughter.

"Surprising, I know," Torrent said smugly. Zoe giggled, and Torrent shot a spray of water at her.

"Hey! No fair! I don't have any way to retaliate!" Zoe cried, not really minding as her extremely good mood had returned and she felt as though she was floating on air.

"That's the idea."

"Here's a better idea," said Ivan, glancing outside. "We have the whole afternoon to do…something. I say we make it something worthwhile." Ivan and Zoe caught Garet's hasty glance at the stairs, but he quickly looked back at the two of them. Ivan continued, "I was thinking, Zoe could use a little practice with her sword…" Ivan grinned at Zoe's glare. "And I could do with a little brushing up as well. So, Garet, what do you say? Zoe and I, and you take the winner?"

"Well…" Garet trailed off, but the others knew it was no real decision for him. "Alright, sure. But I won't go easy on either of you!"

"Like we expected you to," Ivan and Zoe said at the same time, and for a moment they stared at each other, mouths agape, while the Djinn and Garet laughed. Then they laughed too, and, happy if only for just that moment, they walked outside to find a suitable place to hold their little competition.

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"Ha!" Zoe cried as a quick twist of her arms wrenched Garet's sword from his hands. She grinned smugly at the shocked look on Garet's face and the equally surprised looks on the faces of Ivan and the Djinn. "You didn't think I could do it, did you?"

"Garet's stronger than you are," Ivan said plainly. "Anyone watching would have expected him to win."

"That was…wow, Zoe, you're getting fast. I didn't think you could do that with a sword," Garet said. "Good job, seriously."

Zoe grimaced and rubbed one wrist. "I didn't think I could do it either, but the opportunity came…and I just took it." She looked confused when Garet began to laugh. "What?"

"That's half of what sword fighting *is*, Zoe! Seeing the chances and taking them when they come!"

"Uh, yeah. I knew that. Really."

"Man, I'm hungry," Ivan said, looking toward the sky. "That took longer than I thought. It's late. Let's go eat dinner!" Zoe and Garet nodded, sheathing their weapons and heading for the Inn.

Dinner was wonderful, better than breakfast *or* lunch, according to Ivan. The mood was light and happy, even if Garet kept shooting glances at the stairs and Ivan was falling asleep in his dessert. Gust was already asleep on his shoulder.

Taking the Djinni's hint, Ivan rose and went up the stairs, with Garet and Zoe following soon after. Ivan was asleep by the time Zoe made it up the stairs, so she took a

bath and took her time brushing her hair. She didn't find it nearly so annoying anymore, and in fact was starting to like it. Though she didn't feel very tired, she lay down and closed her eyes. Sleep claimed her in minutes.

****

The sun was shining on his face, so he knew they'd made it out of Goma Cave. It felt like he was in a real bed, so he was pretty sure they'd gotten to Bilibin. But the dull ache in his shoulder and the throbbing in his head told him he probably didn't want to be awake just yet. But try as he might he could not fall asleep again, and so opened his eyes slowly. Blinking a few times, he found that he was staring into the worried brown eyes of his friend.

"What did I miss?" he asked, sitting up. He didn't feel too terrible, actually, and his headache was beginning to go away. Garet's smile was one of absolute relief. "You look like I died and came back to life. It couldn't have been that bad, Garet!"

Garet said nothing, only looking at the ground. Isaac's half-smile faded to an uncertain frown. "Really that bad?"

"Yes," Garet said softly. "It was worse the farther we went. Ivan was so worn out…Zoe was too, and even I was running out of steam…but Isaac, you looked so pale…I thought you'd die."

"So I was right in assuming we're in Bilibin. How long have I been out for?"

"About a day and a half," said Ivan, entering. "But we've entertained ourselves. There's a tree that looks like a man, or, that once was a man, and I found a Jupiter Djinni,

and I know how to get to the Mercury Lighthouse…well, sort of."

"That's a lot to have happen in one day. Alright, how *does* one get to Mercury Lighthouse?"

"Well…what I meant was, I know where it *is*. It's just north of Imil, wherever that is."

"I know where it is," Zoe said, coming in with Torrent bouncing on her head. "And none of you are gonna like it."

"Tell us, then, and let us judge for ourselves," said Flint from where he now stood on Isaac's good shoulder.

"We have to go through Bilibin Cave."

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Vil: At long last, I am finished! Chapters may come a bit more slowly now that school has started, but I'll do what I can when I can. Chapter ten, they're going through Bilibin Cave and into Imil. Mia won't show up until chapter eleven probably. But, as always, the more reviews I get the quicker chapter ten shows up!

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Chapter 11: Chapter Ten: A Little Frosty

As Luck Would Have It

Disclaimer: Ah, I haven't don't this in a while. *whispers* Pssst! I don't own it! Ha ha!

A/N: What to say, what to say…er…I'm running out of ideas, and enthusiasm, kinda fast…school really takes it out of you. But I'll keep writing as long as you keep reviewing ;).

Chapter Ten: A Little Frosty

"Bilibin Cave?!" six voices echoed, and Zoe and Torrent nodded as one.

"Not *another* cave," Ivan moaned. "I *hate* rocks!"

"Just *what* exactly is so bad about rocks?" Flint asked indignantly, and Isaac laughed. "Well?"

"Everything," Gust shot back, and Forge nodded his agreement. Torrent began to laugh, her eyes fixed on Forge.

"There's water in Mercury Lighthouse," she pointed out, and Forge scowled. "And it's cold up in Imil. And there's water all round the lighthouse too, and snow, and all sorts of things you Mars folk won't enjoy in the *least*."

"Please, stop!" Garet cried, holding up a hand and faking fear. "I can't bear to hear any more!"

"Come on, guys, this is serious!" Isaac attempted, but he was laughing along with the rest. In fact the only one who

didn't seem to be laughing was Zoe. Isaac caught her eyes and in them saw many things, chief among those being worry, fear, and…excitement?

"When do we leave?" Flint asked, jumping up and down on the bed a bit. "I happen to *like* rocks, cold ones or otherwise."

"We'll leave in two days," Isaac said seriously, a determined glint in his eye.

"Two days?!" chorused a number of aghast voices.

"Isaac, I don't know if two days is enough time for—" Garet began, but Isaac cut him off.

"It is ample time for everyone to be packed, rested, and ready, Garet. Trust me on that."

"But *Isaac*, you know that's not what I—"

"Not what you meant. I know. And frankly I think you're overreacting. Not to mention overstepping yourself a bit, Mars Adept." This last comment obviously had some significance, though it was not one that Zoe and Ivan understood, for Garet's eyes lit for a moment and he gave a sagely nod.

"Ah. I see your point. Well then…two days it is…anyone for dinner?" Garet asked rather cheerfully, glancing at the setting sun. "We've only got two days to enjoy this fine cuisine after all."

"*You* call it 'fine cuisine,'" Isaac said with a grin. "My mom cooked better."

"You would say that!"

"You bet. Now *go*." At that, Garet, Ivan, and Zoe left, their Djinn flashing into invisibility. On the way down the stairs, Garet muttered, "Venus Adepts. You argue with them, you might as well argue with a wall."

"I agree with *that* at least," Ivan commented, and Garet ruffled the boy's hair. "Will ya stop doing that?! It's *annoying*!!"

"That's the idea."

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Two days later, the four left Bilibin early and headed north. "Imil is north," Isaac had reasoned. "It only makes sense that Bilibin Cave is north too."

"Only one problem with that," Garet said, and Isaac looked at him sideways.

"What problem?"

"Those mountains right there in front of us. *Impassable* mountains, Isaac. Impassable, by the way, means one cannot pass over, under, or around them."

"I *know* what impassable means!"

"Why don't we go that way?" Ivan said, pointing to his left. Isaac and Garet looked at each other for a moment, then nodded wordlessly. Zoe, however, was staring at the mountains with a growing frown, and when Garet touched her shoulder he found that she was trembling.

"Zoe? Are you alright?" he asked, shaking her a bit. Snapping out of her daze, she looked at him with concern-filled eyes.

"Something lies beyond those mountains," she said in an ominous voice.

"Many things lie beyond those mountains," Torrent piped up, rather confused at what Zoe was feeling.

"It's not a good thing. In fact it is a very evil thing." Zoe shivered. "And we're going to have to face it…and soon."

"Stop talking like that," Isaac said quietly. "If it happens, we'll deal with it. No use dwelling on such things right now."

"*I'd* rather dwell on the cooking temperature of Garet's hair," Ivan muttered, and Gust began to giggle. Garet glared, and Ivan gave him an innocent grin.

"Come *on*," Gust said, trying to pull them back to their current task. "We *do* want to get out of this cave by nightfall, right?"

"I've heard *that* before," Torrent muttered grimly. "Didn't like it the first time, don't like it this time, but its not as though I have a choice, right?"

"Not unless you want to stay behind, and miss Mercury Lighthouse," Zoe said with a grin.

"Ok, ok, I get the picture," Torrent laughed as they traveled southwest. They were both pleased and devastated when their path took them around the mountains and to the entrance of a cave.

"Well…are you all ready?" Isaac asked, his blue eyes serious.

"Hold on a minute," said Flint, appearing on Isaac's shoulder. With a yellow flash, he dissolved into specks and reappeared in another flash on Garet's shoulder. Isaac found his mind suddenly empty of the presence of his Djinni, while Garet suddenly felt *two* Djinn in his own mind, instead of one.

"Flint, what in the world?!" Garet asked, his voice reaching strangely high tones. Isaac only stood calmly and waited, knowing the Djinni must have a good reason for what he was doing.

"Come over here," he said, running towards a sheer cliff face, several yards away from the actual cave entrance. At the foot of the cliff there grew the sapling of what would someday be a large creeper vine. Garet bent down to look at it and shrugged.

"That's Isaac's department, Flint, not mine."

"It is now! Use the Psynergy I've given you!"

"Psynergy? You gave me…but how?!"

"It happens, sometimes, when Djinni join with those who are not of their element. You should be able to make this grow!"

"What good will that do us?" Zoe asked, and Torrent smiled.

"He is right," she said. "There is another entrance to this cave, one higher in the cliff face. It is said that whoever reaches this entrance shall find treasure."

"Said by whom, I wonder," Ivan mused as Garet puzzled over how to make the small vine grow. "Some

thieves waiting to ambush anyone who's already worn out from climbing, I'll bet."

"Well, you're trusting," Isaac said to him, grinning. Turning back to face Garet, he was amazed as a yellowish light surrounded the vine and it shot up, growing until it was high enough to reach the top of the cliff and thick enough to support the weight of at least three people. Or so they hoped.

Flint became sparkling balls of light again and rejoined Isaac, who smiled. Not having a Djinni attached to him had left him feeling rather empty. "Try it, Garet," the Djinni urged, and the Mars Adept shrugged and hauled himself onto the vine, climbing a few feet.

"Holds *me* well enough," he said, grinning down at them. "Should hold the rest of you just fine. Come on up, guys!" he said, continuing to climb. Isaac followed, enjoying climbing a live vine up an earthen wall. He always was exceedingly happy when he was in his element. He would have stopped when he reached the top just to turn around and enjoy the view from that high up, but Zoe was quickly climbing the vine after him, eyes riveted on the spot where it crawled over the top of the ledge. Sighing, Isaac gave a last shove and landed lightly on the ledge, grinning at Garet.

"Show off," Garet muttered, and Isaac's grin broadened.

Zoe came quickly after them, shaking a bit, but saying nothing. By now they all knew she was terrified of heights, and by now she really didn't care. She actually *preferred* Goma Cave to this. At least there she didn't have to worry about a long drop ending up who-knew-where.

Ivan came last, and a bit more slowly due to his small size. He had almost reached the top when his left foot slipped on a very small branch of the vine, and because he was reaching up with his right hand as he took the step, he found himself dangling in the air by his left hand.

"Ivan!" was the collective yell as the others saw what was happening. The Jupiter Adept cried out and reached with his free hand for the vine. His hand caught something and he reached with the other one to continue to climb.

The weak stem he had grabbed broke off in his right hand, and with no hands holding on Ivan slid off the vine and plummeted towards the ground. He yelled once, then slammed into the ground with a sickening thud.

"IVAN!" Zoe yelled, and, barely thinking of what she was doing, leapt off the cliff after him, calling out, "Flight!" as Isaac and Garet moved, albeit too late, to stop her. Her fall slowed, then nearly stopped, as silvery light surrounded her. She landed lightly on the ground next to Ivan and gasped. A hand covered her mouth as she choked back a sob. Looking at him, there was no way he could be anything but dead.

Or so she thought, until Gust flickered into view on the other side of the boy. "Gust!" Zoe said, relief flooding her voice. "You're alive!"

"Not for long," the Jupiter Djinni replied weakly, glancing at Ivan. "Let me guess—*you* can't do a thing about it? Isaac can, I think…but he can't get down here in time… he can't fly like you…I'm babbling, aren't I?" Zoe nodded. "Sorry. It's a Jupiter Djinni reaction to bad situations."

Zoe, about to reply, stopped as her Psynergy began to race through her. Unsure of what would happen and not

caring as long as whatever it was worked, she almost automatically threw a hand to the sky and let her power take over.

"Explorer's Restore!" Zoe cried, and was surprised to feel power coming from literally everything around her, its silver light flying from her fingertips and surrounding Ivan. Isaac, who was halfway down by this time, gasped as he looked below him, and Garet, about to begin the climb himself, could only stare in awe.

When the light vanished, Zoe sank to the ground, eyes closed, though she was smiling. Isaac climbed down as fast as he could, and Garet jumped and as he landed, headed into a forward roll that broke most of his fall. Standing and brushing the dirt from his clothes, he went to Ivan, while Isaac knelt by Zoe and gently shook her. Her deep violet eyes fluttered open, and she pushed herself up.

"Nice trick," Isaac commented wryly, and Zoe's smile widened for a moment, then became a dark frown.

"Only a nice trick if it worked," she said softly, glancing at Garet, who now stood, carrying Ivan. Isaac helped Zoe up, then looked his best friend squarely in the eyes.

"Well, Garet," Isaac said, "looks like we won't be seeing anything cold today after all."

"Don't assume things," Gust said, appearing again and fluttering to Zoe's shoulder. "It makes quite a *fool* out of you and me."

"Gust!" Zoe cried again, resisting her urge to hug the little Djinni.

"You seem to have an adequate grasp on what I am named, Zoe," Gust replied with a small smile. Zoe grinned back. Her high spirits had returned, for more obvious reasons this time, but she knew there was still the matter of how they would get back up to the cave's high entrance.

"Strange thing for one who despises heights to have the power of flight," Flint mused, catching Zoe's eye, and she gulped. Maybe the others *did* have a plan, but she was almost positive she wouldn't like it. "Don't you agree, Zoe?"

"I do, and though I don't like what you're planning, Djinni, I'll do it. If I can, that is. I don't know if I could lift us *all*…"

"Try anyway," Isaac said quietly, and Zoe considered sending him a glare, then sighed. Whatever she'd just done, it had taken a *lot* of energy…but she couldn't let them down. It seemed to be against her very being not to at least try.

Closing her eyes and holding out a hand, she whispered, "Flight," and, though she couldn't see it, she knew that Psynergetic light was surrounding her. Focusing as hard as she could, she extended her power to Isaac, and then to Garet and Ivan. In her mind she saw blue light, and felt another power join hers.

Torrent her mind stated, and her answer was a resounding *Of course*

Slowly the four rose into the air, and Isaac looked down at the ground, impressed. As a young boy he had often imagined what it would have been like to fly. It had been much like this, only in his mind no Psynergy had been involved. He was disappointed when they landed on top of the cliff, and he could see in Garet's face that he was too.

The silvery energy around them disappeared, and Isaac, expecting it, turned and caught Zoe as she collapsed again.

"Well now," Garet said, glancing at the high noon sky. "We'll be taking a late-night trip through *this* cave, I guess."

"At any rate, we can't go through like *this*," Isaac agreed, gently setting Zoe on the ground, leaning her against the cliff face. Garet laid Ivan down near her, and the two boys looked at each other. Blue eyes met brown for a split second before both of them began to laugh.

"What a rush! I've never felt *anything* like that!" Garet said, grinning. "I mean…*flying*, Isaac! I don't even *like* wind things, but that…I wish I could do it for myself." The look in his eyes was a mixture of excitement, awe, and jealousy.

"Don't think so," Isaac said. "I don't even think Ivan can do it, and we *know* what kind of Adept he is. But I do agree—that was amazing." Their conversation passed into thoughtful silence, and Isaac sat down, lay back and stared up at the sky. Puffy white clouds floated by, occasionally blocking the sun's light. Garet, not one to sit still for long unless necessary, began to pace back and forth, thoughts tumbling over each other in his mind.

You really need to organize your thoughts Forge said in his mind, and he grimaced.

You don't think I know that already Garet thought back in an exasperated tone.

Thought I might tell you anyway

"Very funny Djinni," Garet muttered, and Isaac laughed silently. Whatever had brought on that comment had to have been funny. Looking back at the clouds, Isaac was overcome for a moment with memories of his past.

The most prominent of these was when he was about ten, lying on the roof of his house and looking at clouds much like these. It was a warm day in late summer, and his mother was busy cooking dinner while his father was down in the plaza. Eyes half-closed, he had been staring lazily skyward and thinking of nothing particularly profound. Or he *was*, but the approach of footsteps on the straw roused him, and he leaned up on his elbows, finding himself staring into two cloud-grey eyes.

"'Lo, Isaac," said the girl standing there. Her golden hair blew in the slight breeze as she stared out over Vale.

"Hi," he said back. She was two years younger than he, but he'd rarely noticed. "What are you doing up here?"

"Looking, I guess. Someday, I wanna head out there," she said dreamily, waving her hand at the land outside of Vale. "Explore the world and have adventures. Like you, Isaac."

"Me? I've had no adventures, unless you count that time I almost snuck up to Mount Aleph."

"Not *yet*! In a while." The girl's eyes became distant, and Isaac looked at her strangely. "When three of the Four are taken by fiery hands, you will go, and others with you. I wish you luck," the girl said, jumping off the roof and landing near her twin, who was waiting.

Thinking back on it now, Isaac realized that what the girl, who had eventually become a Jupiter Adept, had said was true. Saturos and Menardi had taken three of the four Elemental Stars, and he and Garet had left Vale. And he had made a promise that he would not return until his quest was finished.

Sighing, Isaac pulled himself up and sat cross-legged, staring out over the part of the world that he could see. He thought he saw a town to the south, and wondered if maybe it was Vault, but that wasn't likely. Their short stay in Vault seemed ages ago. "Was it so long?" he asked aloud, and Garet turned to face him.

"So long?"

"Since Vault. It feels like it's been forever. I guess it hasn't…but I know we've still got a long way to go. And the longer we wait, though we can't help it this time, the closer Saturos, Menardi, Alex and Felix get to lighting Mercury Lighthouse. And we can't let them do this. We just can't."

"I know we can't, Isaac. I'm just as determined to stop them as you are."

"So many people…the entire *world* is depending on *us*. *US*, Garet. Four kids!"

"Look, Isaac," Garet said, staring into his friend's eyes with all the intensity he could muster. "I've known you my entire life, and you've never once lost your cool. Don't start now. Not trying to pressure you or anything, but if you panic, we all do."

"A matter of one's perspective," a voice said, immediately breaking into giggles. Garet grinned, and Isaac turned towards the source of the voices.

"Ivan!" they both said at once, and the Jupiter Adept nodded and slowly stood, still grinning, and looked down at himself, rather amazed.

"What in the world…" he whispered, turning his hands over and looking at his palms. "Is there an explanation

coming, or do I have to guess?"

"Please, no more guessing," Zoe said sleepily from where she sat. The three turned to look at her. "I've had enough guessing for three lifetimes." Standing, she grinned at them, flicking her braid back over her shoulder. "So, what did I miss?"

"Not much, actually. Or, rather," Garet amended, "not much *time*. If we're ready…we should really head into the cave."

"Well, I'm ready."

"I don't think I could possibly be *more* ready!" Ivan said, his big purple eyes even wider in awe and shock. "Zoe, what happened? I know I fell…"

"No offense to you, Ivan, but can it wait? I'm not sure myself, exactly. Except that your Djinni has a tendency to babble."

"I cold have told him *that*," said Gust, appearing again. Ivan jumped.

"I will *never* get used to you popping in and out like that!" he yelped, and Gust laughed.

"Good. That means I can keep you on your toes." The Djinni said, and disappeared again. Ivan slapped his fore head with his hand and sighed, making the others laugh.

"The downside to Djinn," Isaac said, putting a hand on the smaller boy's shoulder, "is the fact that they're with you *all the time*. Which, if you think about it, is also the upside."

"No logical reasoning," Garet said, shaking his head.

"How would you even *know* what logical reasoning was?" Isaac retorted, and Garet frowned. Zoe laughed along with them, but was shooting continual glances at the cave entrance. "Right," Isaac said, seeing this. "Let's go, guys. And please, no discussion on just how big Bilibin Cave is. Let me clarify, Garet, that *it cuts through a mountain range*. Pretty darn big." Isaac gave Garet a wry smile and headed for the cave entrance. Zoe laughed and fell in behind him, with Ivan walking next to her and Garet trailing behind, sulking.

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"Jump across, idiot!" Garet said. Isaac glared at him. The five-foot-wide jump to the other side of the crevice wasn't something he was going to enjoy. But on the other side was what looked almost like a treasure chest, if that idea weren't somewhat odd. Isaac backed up a few feet to give himself a running start, then ran at the jump and at the last possible moment pushed off. Flying over a space just under his height was both thrilling and terrifying at the same time. Landing on the other side was a bit pf a problem, and resulted into a rather painful roll into the chest.

"Ai," Isaac muttered, standing and facing the strange object. Seeing it was unlocked, he pushed the lid open and gasped at what was inside. It was a sword, longer than his current one and lighter, but looking all the more dangerous. Flint flashed visible on his shoulder and let out a long, low whistle.

"Elven Rapier," the Djinni said in an awed voice. "Very powerful weapon. It's got some weapon Psynergy or other, but I don't know what kind."

"How do you know what it is, anyway?" Isaac asked as the others followed him across. They slid down an embankment and landed on the lower floor before the Djinni answered.

"I just do."

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"I don't believe it," Ivan said, shading his eyes from the fading sunlight.

"Don't believe what? How *cold* it is here?" Garet said, shivering.

"We made it through that cave and didn't see a thing. Not one monster or demon or whatever it is that likes to beat us up. But I did see a nice-looking torch that might be useful in the hair re-styling of a certain cold-hating Mars Adept." Ivan grinned slyly as Garet aimed a punch, which the boy ducked easily. "Sorry, Garet, but you're a bit too slow for a Jupiter Adept."

"Good thing, then, that I'm a Mars Adept."

"Very funny."

"Thought so."

"Are they going to argue the *whole way* to Mercury Lighthouse?" Zoe wondered aloud, shivering a bit at the chill of the wind.

"And probably well beyond that," Isaac answered with a wink. He was almost knocked over by Ivan running forward, into the steadily strengthening winds.

"I feel sorry for you!" he called back. "You can't enjoy this!"

"Don't want to," Garet mumbled, and Isaac chuckled. Zoe began to laugh too, but her laughter was cut short as Ivan let out a strangled cry. Looking at each other for a fraction of a second, the three ran ahead to where Ivan was out on the middle of a frozen lake facing down a giant bear-like creature.

"Mauler," Isaac muttered, drawing his new Elven Rapier. Garet drew his longsword, and Zoe sighed and worked free of its sheath the longsword that Isaac had given her after obtaining the Elven Rapier. She had actually preferred the Bandit's Sword to this, it being lighter and having its own sort of Psynergetic attack, but she did agree that one did more damage with a bigger weapon.

If one could lift said weapon off the ground.

Ivan had already unleashed a blast of wind at the mauler, but it hadn't done much of anything. Angrily, and dodging swiping claws, he glared up at the monster and yelled, "Gust unleash!" into the wind. The Djinni appeared and became glowing winds, flying at the mauler, who still seemed unaffected.

"Guard's Flare!" Garet called as he brought himself to a stop on the slippery lake. Fireballs pelted the creature, who roared in more annoyance than anger. "Well, that worked like a brick."

"New expression, Garet?" Isaac asked as he passed him by, swinging at the mauler with the Elven Rapier and yelling, "Vorpal Slash!"

"New expression. Right. Boy's losing it."

"Not the time, fire-head," Ivan said as Gust reappeared, now more of a ball of purple light than a Djinni. "I summon the spirit of Jupiter, power of the Wind!" The power of Jupiter attacked the mauler, who was now clearly on the losing end of this battle, and Zoe slid up next to Ivan, preparing to stab the thing with her longsword, since she couldn't raise it any higher than her waist.

Seeing her weakness, the mauler struck one final time, and its claws tore into Zoe's stomach, staining the snow a deep red. Isaac moved to help her, thinking she would fall, but instead watched as, defiantly, she ran her sword into the mauler, which disintegrated. Sighing in what had to be relief, she collapsed on the snowy ground.

"Zoe!" Garet cried, hurrying to her but slipping on the icy lake. "Hold on Zoe!"

Those were the last words she heard before everything went black.

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"One more ooze and I scream," Ivan muttered. Even he was feeling the cold now, and the winds had died down. He was definitely no longer enjoying this walk. Or hike. Or whatever it was. "How close do you think Imil is?"

It was fully night now, having been twilight when they had run into the mauler. There was no moon, and barely any stars to light their way. Worse, it made it increasingly hard to see any enemies that might be lurking about. *To top it all off*, Ivan thought miserably, *we have NO IDEA if we're even close to Imil at all here in the dark, but we can't stop.*

"Lights up ahead," Isaac said, pointing though he knew no one could see his hand. They didn't need to. The lights

were comfort enough. They were indeed close to Imil, and moving in the right direction.

Garet remained silent, as he had been for much of the time after the mauler attack. He was carrying Zoe, who stirred once or twice, but otherwise was basically, though he hated to even think the term, dead weight. But he'd never say so out loud. He knew he wouldn't feel that way about it, either, if it weren't so dark and the situation so…serious.

Slowly, more slowly then they really liked, the four Adepts walked into Imil.

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Vil: FINALLY! It is DONE! Sorry it took so long. Trying to come up with good description this time.

Kaede: emphasize trying

Vil: shuddup. Anyway, like usual, REVIEW!! Chapter eleven in process as I type!

Kaede: just one question. Have you been cutting scenes again?

Vil: Yes. But I think they can gather the parts I left out for themselves. I like to make my audience think a bit.

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Chapter 12: Chapter Eleven: Not Impossible, Just Ver...

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: I actually do have the end, the very end, of this story planned. But that's not the point. The point is this: Elemental Adept is right. I lack description, sort of. So, hopefully, I can remember *how* to describe most of this. Some of it…well, I've never been very good at describing when one of the characters gets hurt…you know, what it looks like and all. But I will *try*.

Kaede: Not the 'try' thing again. Please, not again!

Vil: You be quiet! Now, I'm going to answer some of your reviews…cause you all ask questions! But I like that!

Feonyx: I plan to take this through the ENITRE game, and then have a sequel when GS:LA comes out. I already have the end of this story planned, as I've said. And I know there are supposed to be only seven Djinn of every type in the game, but for my purposes I'm creating more. Though I could use a word involving fire that isn't a Djinni already. A hybrid adept is a good guess, by the way.

General Failure: Yes, you do find out what kind of Adept she is. A long time from now. At the end which my big mouth and runaway fingers really want to reveal, but I can't.

Jupiter Girl and Elemental Adept: Thank you both for your reviews and comments and everything else, and the rest of you whose names I forget right now, sorry for that, but as I've said, internet downstairs, story upstairs. *shrugs* and now, ON TO THE FICCY!!

Chapter Eleven: Not Impossible. Just Very, VERY Unlikely. (I completely forget why I called it this…)

Isaac felt someone shaking his shoulder. He had collapsed into a bed at Imil's Inn the night before, though it had probably been somewhere closer to morning, after everything that had gone on.

"Whoever it is," Isaac mumbled, "the sun had better be pretty darn high by now or you're gonna be facing one *really* ticked off Venus Adept."

"Tell me," answered a cool voice, "has he *always* had that sense of humor, or is it a new thing?"

"Always, and before that, even," Garet's voice answered. "You wouldn't know it by looking at him, though."

"You're *terribly* funny, you know that?" Isaac shot back, rubbing his eyes and sitting up. His first thought was to glance out the window, and he noticed with some interest that the sun was at almost its highest point. "I've been asleep that long, huh?"

"Sleep isn't something we usually get," Garet explained to the girl standing behind him, and she nodded emotionlessly. Isaac blinked a few times, trying to remember who she was.

It came back to him in a rush of memory. Walking into Imil in the dead of night, barely a star in the sky. A single person there to greet them, this girl, her shining blue hair flying in the sudden wind and her sky-colored eyes concerned and curious. A Mercury Djinni had been perched on her shoulder.

Quickly, Ivan had told her of their problem and asked if there was anyone who could help them. The girl had smiled and nodded, and led them around buildings and over a bridge that spanned a frozen river. Opening two large wooden doors, she had led them into a large, well-heated room.

Isaac had sat down on chair and dozed off after that, but he remembered being woken up by Garet and paying for rooms at the Inn…still, something seemed to be missing.

Getting out of bed and stretching, Isaac locked eyes with the girl who was leaning against the doorframe, arms folded, eyes level, hair tied away from her face.

"Three questions. One, who are you, two, *what* are you, and three, where is Zoe?" Isaac folded his own arms and met the girl's steely gaze with one of his.

"You'd do better not to argue," Ivan piped up from the other corner of the room. "Garet says arguing with Venus Adepts is like arguing with walls."

"Well then," said the girl, a small smile of amusement appearing on her face. "I am Mia of Imil, a healer. Your fourth companion, Zoe I take it, is…safe."

"You're hiding something," Isaac accused, eyes angry. He moved as though to reach for a weapon, but was interrupted by the blue flashing of a Djinni on Mia's shoulder.

"Indeed she is," said the Djinni, looking at Mia, who looked steadily back. "Your friend is and will be fine, and if you, Venus Adept, will ready yourself for the day, we will take you to her. Please, accept my apologies for Mia's hiding

this from you. Her power is a strange thing to many…and yet a revered thing to just as many."

"Please, Fizz, stop complementing me like that!" Mia said with a laugh. She flashed a smile at Isaac. "Sorry for acting that way though. If you'll get ready, I *will* take you to your friend…and then there are some things I must do, but you might like walking around town a bit."

"Not *this* freezing little village," Garet muttered, shivering even in the warm room of the Inn. "I can't *stand* cold."

"Then stay inside," Isaac said with a grin. "Shoo, all of you! Unless you don't *want* me to get ready?" he added when no one made to leave. Quickly the others left, and Isaac changed into warmer clothes, wrapping a yellow scarf around his neck. Realizing something, he paused for a moment, his face a puzzled frown. Then he shrugged, grinned, and joined the others in the Inn's common room.

Together the four walked out into the cold, snow falling lightly as Mia led them again over a bridge and into a building with a yellow roof. Upon entering, Mia disappeared down a set of stairs. Garet sighed with relief to be out of the cold, and Ivan smiled at the two children who were also in the room.

"Hello," said the girl, who looked to be about ten. "I am Megan. That," she said, pointing to the boy, "is my twin, Justin. We're Mia's apprentices."

"Are you now?" Isaac asked, suddenly very interested. "And what are you learning?"

"How to do what Mia does," Justin said proudly, grinning. Garet reached down and ruffled Justin's hair,

making him laugh. "She says we're much better than her first student!"

"Justin, shh! You know you're not supposed to speak of that!" Megan scolded him, and he blushed.

"It's alright," said Mia's voice, and she appeared at the top of the stairs again. The Djinni Fizz was running in front of her, along with another and more familiar Mercury Djinni. (Even if they all *do* look the same. ;])

"Torrent!" Flint's voice cried, and he flashed visible. Isaac glared at the Djinni, but couldn't find it in him to get angry, as he had just noticed the figure following Mia up the stairs.

"Zoe!" he called, smiling, and she smiled back. Garet forgot all about the cold, his brown eyes lighting up as she came towards them. Ivan, unable to resist himself, ran the short distance that still stood between them and hugged Zoe, then let go, face redder than Garet's hair.

"Good…afternoon, I guess," Zoe said, glancing out a window at the sunlight glinting off snow. "You guys miss me?"

"Maybe," Isaac said, a sly grin on his face. Mia, standing a bit behind Zoe, smiled also. *So to them*, she thought, *maybe it is not so different*.

"Why you little…" Zoe began, but her smile betrayed her thoughts. Finally she gave up on looking angry and began to laugh, hugging first Isaac, then Garet. "You don't know how nice it is to know you made it here in one piece! Well…I guess I mean three separate one pieces…oh, you know what I mean!"

"We do," Isaac said, his smile wider than Garet had seen it in months. Thinking of something, the Mars Adept turned his gaze to Mia.

"You did this," he said. She met his eyes and sighed. He was not accusing her, she knew. He was stating what he knew was truth.

"I did," she replied, ice-blue eyes steady. Garet's grin took on a more sarcastic edge.

"You are an adept," he went on, and she gave him a confused look. "A Mercury Adept, actually. One who wields the power of the Element Water."

"For one time in your life," Isaac said, grinning at his friend, "you're right. Though I don't think she's ever heard of Adepts, or Psynergy."

"But I have," Mia said, exchanging a grin with Zoe. "She's told me all about your quest…and about the Lighthouses." Going to a window in the far wall, she glanced out and slightly up at the peak of Mercury Lighthouse.

Torrent and Fizz landed on each of her shoulders and followed her gaze. "I remember this place!" Torrent said happily. "This is…where I come from!"

"It is," Fizz agreed. "Water once flowed from the fountain at the base of the Lighthouse, but the fountain has long since run dry. It is said that if the lighthouse is lit, the water will flow again…but the lighting of Mercury Lighthouse will be the herald of falling doom."

"You're no fun," Torrent said to Fizz, and Mia laughed. Fizz, rather insulted, made a 'hrmph' sound and flashed out.

"He *is* very serious, but then, he's a big help." Mia sighed and turned back to the window in time to see a blue flash at the top of the lighthouse. "Oh no!" she cried, and without another word ran from the building, Torrent flying from her shoulder and flashing out, then reappearing on Zoe's head.

"What was that all about?" Ivan wondered aloud, and the others shrugged.

"I don't know about you," Garet said, a determined glint in his eyes, "but I plan to find out." The others nodded and left the building, almost instantly getting lost. Ivan, not seeing the ice under all the snow, slid across the frozen river until he ran into a rock sticking up through the ice. The others followed him, though they knew the ice was there and were a bit more balanced in crossing.

"Look!" Zoe said, pointing. Just above them, in a wall that must have had water flowing over it in summer, was a split that resembled the opening of a cave. Isaac stepped forward to head over to it, but his movement made him slip and fall into Garet. The two of them began to tumble across the ice, with Zoe and Ivan skidding and sliding after them.

Only the light from outside lit the inside of the small cavern, or so the Adepts thought upon first glance. But Garet noticed a light behind some rocks, and quickly and quietly he went to investigate. Behind the rocks was a Mars Djinni, its fire creating a soft glow. Garet, about to turn back and tell the others, suddenly sneezed, attracting the Fire Djinni's attention.

Looking at it, Garet was halfway to drawing his sword when he realized that the Djinni didn't want a fight. Instead, it transformed into flames, which rained down on Garet but

caused nothing more than a pleasant warm feeling. He felt the presence of another mind join his and grinned. *Wait until the others find out*, he thought.

"Garet! Come on! We're gonna go eat!" Isaac called, and Garet came out from behind the rocks, still grinning. Isaac caught the look on Garet's face and stopped whatever he had been about to say. "Alright, smiley, what did you find?" he said after a short pause.

"Another way to set your head afire?" Ivan asked expectantly, but Garet couldn't be bothered even to glare at him. He was too excited.

"Actually, you may be right," he said, and at a silent signal from him, Forge and the second Djinni appeared on his shoulders. The others gasped, and the new Djinni gave its form of a bow.

"I am Fever, Mars Djinni," she said.

"Bound to the power of the Fire," the rest of them finished, and Fever laughed.

"I take it you've heard this before?"

"Multiple times, though the words are always different," Ivan said. "By any chance do you enjoy setting things on fire?"

"Boy, I am a Mars Djinni. My *life* is fire. So, yes, I do enjoy setting things on fire. In fact, I might start with your hair, Jupiter Adept." At these words Ivan went white, his mouth dropping open and no words coming out. Zoe and Isaac struggled not to laugh, but in the end gave up and exploded in giggles.

"Now that is revenge to a remarkable degree," Torrent said between laughs. Zoe nodded, finally getting control of herself and glancing back at the entrance to the cavern. "Something's bothering you," the Djinni accused, and Zoe nodded.

"It's weird," she said, shivering a little in the sudden cold wind that blew through the cavern. "I just feel like something's wrong. And I know nothing is…not here, anyway."

"I know," Torrent said, shuddering a little, though not from the cold. "Being closer to Mercury Lighthouse…I feel something too. Something out of place."

"Isaac," Zoe said, and the boy stopped laughing at looked at her seriously. "I think we should follow Mia to Mercury Lighthouse."

"You think Saturos and Menardi are already there?" Isaac asked, and they all turned to look at her, Garet's Djinn flashing out in unison.

"Maybe. I just get a bad feeling…and letting Mia go off like that alone…I don't know if she can get to the top of the Lighthouse by herself."

"How do you know she went to the Lighthouse?" Garet asked. "She didn't tell us where she was going."

"No…she didn't, did she? Well. That's where she went, at any rate. And I for one intend to follow her!" With that Zoe turned and stepped back onto the ice outside of the cavern and pushed off, sliding about until she found herself on land again. Glancing quickly up at the lighthouse, she ran off, the others still staring after her.

"Come on, we have to follow her!" Ivan said finally, not even caring as he slid across the ice into another rock. Isaac and Garet were close behind, and when they reached land it was easy to follow Zoe's footprints through the snow. The sun had reached the horizon, and no matter what was happening, Isaac swore to himself that he would not climb a lighthouse in the dead of night. Not ever.

Leaving town, the three could see Zoe ahead of them stumble and fall in the snow, then get back up again and keep on running. Garet gritted his teeth against the cold and ran faster, keeping better pace with Isaac and Ivan. "Zoe!" he called, but a sudden wind stole his voice and carried it off.

Panting, Zoe at last reached Mercury Lighthouse, leaning against a stone pillar to catch her breath. She heard Isaac, Ivan and Garet come up behind her, but said nothing. She had spotted Mia standing on a section of floor up ahead, with most of the other sections either collapsed or just missing. Directly in front of Mia was a stone statue, some sort of soldier holding a sword. Mia looked frustrated and a bit frightened, and she held tight to a witch's wand as she glared at the statue.

Isaac walked up next to her and studied the statue as well, though not in an angry manner as Mia was doing. After a few moments, he extended his hand and whispered, "Move." Mia stood, aghast, as she watched what appeared to be a spirit hand reach out, grasp the statue, and push it to the side. Behind the statue was what appeared to be a portal, about the size and shape of a door but containing swirling light.

"I'm not even sure I should ask," Mia said quietly, still awestruck.

"You don't have to," Zoe said. "That's Move Psynergy, I think. Garet's better at it than Isaac is, though. And don't look at me like that, Isaac, because you know I'm telling the truth!" she added when Isaac gave her the 'what are you talking about?' look.

"Well…I'd better go see what's up," Mia said, shaking off her shock and jumping across the short gap to where the statue had once stood. Touching the wavering light of the portal, she closed her eyes and it became a doorway, which she walked through. The others looked at each other for a moment, then faced the doorway again as they heard a scream from inside.

"Get your Djinn ready to summon," Isaac called back as he jumped to the doorway and went inside. The others were quick to follow, and they found themselves in a long hallway. Either side was lined with statues of women holding water jugs as though they were pouring water from them. And in front of them was what looked like a giant lizard. Mia stood facing it, her witch's wand shooting sparks at it. The thing swiped at her, throwing her against a wall.

"Get it!" Ivan yelled angrily, running to face the lizard man. Isaac, Garet and Zoe quickly came to stand beside him, weapons ready. Pointing his Shaman's Rod at the lizard man, Ivan threw his other hand in the air and yelled, "Wind Seer's Ray!" As the giant bolts of lightning gave the lizard man a bit of a shock, Garet brought his hands together in front of his face and closed his eyes. His Djinn sensed this and appeared on his shoulders, each one glowing a fiery red.

"I summon the spirit of Kirin, mythical beast of flame, power of the Fire!" he cried. Slowly, a circle of fire appeared in front of him. A giant being made of living flames burst

from the circle, a rider on its back. Garet, feeling as though all his power was draining out of him at once, held on desperately as the spirit of Kirin rammed into the lizard man. With a bright flash, the summoned spirit disappeared, and the lizard man fell to its knees. "Someone else get it!" Garet muttered angrily. "I ran out of power!"

"Right behind you," Zoe said, longsword raised before her. Charging the lizard man, flashes of the mauler entered her mind. She saw the claws on the lizard man and for a moment hesitated, but the fact that she was afraid only hardened her resolve. The others never showed fear, or at least they didn't usually. With an angry cry, she ran the lizard man through, its strange black blood dripping off her sword. The monster disintegrated, and Zoe sheathed her now-clean sword.

"Thought you couldn't lift that thing," Ivan said, folding his arms and giving Zoe a sly stare.

"I didn't think I could either," she admitted. "Guess maybe I am getting better after all."

"Which reminds me," said Mia's voice, and the four whirled to find her standing behind them, leaning on the witch's wand for support. "Where do you people *come* from? And wipe that surprised look off your face, Fire boy," Mia added at Garet's shocked look. "What kind of a healer would I be if I couldn't heal myself?"

"In answer to your first question," Isaac said with a grin, "Garet and I come from Vale. It's…far from here."

"I am from Kalay," Ivan said. "And in answer to your second question, not one at all."

"Very funny," Mia shot back, though she was smiling. "Zoe? Where are *you* from?"

"I…I don't know, exactly. I mean…I can't remember much before the day I met Isaac and Garet. For a while, I thought I came from Imil…but now I know I don't. It's…it's too cold here for me to live here, I guess." Grinning sheepishly, Zoe glanced at Garet, who was leaning against one of the statues. "Garet?"

"Don't mind me," he said, breathing hard. "That summons took power. More of it than a single-Djinni summons does. I'm alright."

"Liar," Ivan said, adopting a sly smirk. "And I didn't even have to read your mind that time."

"Very funny," Garet shot back, pushing himself away from the statue and glancing at the door beyond.

"Oh no! I forgot!" Mia cried, and ran on ahead through the door.

"Mia wait!" Zoe called, but Mia either didn't hear or ignored her. The four looked at each other, unsure of what to do.

"Well…I guess we follow her in," Isaac said finally, and as one they turned to face the doorway.

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Vil: YAY! Sorry that took so long—spent a lot of time studying lighthouses and summons and all that. Plus school, and tennis, and other stuff. So, I'm thinking two chapters of lighthouse-climbing, and one to fight Saturos, and then we're going back to Bilibin to do the Kolima thing. But I need

five more reviews than however many I've got right now before I post the next chapter! (Which is halfway done, BTW.)

Kaede: So I think she's asking you all to review!!

Vil: That would be correct. And keep an eye out for Kaede's GS fic, which will be coming soon!!

Chapter 13: Chapter Twelve: Puzzling Climb

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Hmm. The first Mercury Lighthouse chapter. But first:

Lioness Blackfire: No, I'm not missing Djinn. The two Djinn you are talking about, Granite and Breeze, don't come until Kolima Forest and Kolima, which I haven't done yet, because it would seem pointless to have them beat Tret Tree, then trek all the way to Imil, beat the lighthouse, then trek ALL THE WAY BACK TO KOLIMA FOREST. Instead, they're doing Kolima all in one shot. Later.

Griffinkhan: (note: ignore my terrible spelling. Ff.net downstairs, story upstairs, you get the idea) I like what you said about Zoe's element having to do with her attack calls. But as you probably know, depending on the Djinn a character has, their class changes. Nice guess though ;).

Chapter Twelve: Puzzling Climb

"I thought you said you weren't *ever* going to climb a lighthouse during the night," Zoe teased as they entered the next room.

"Well, I can't very well let Mia go up there by herself, can I?" Isaac shot back. "Would you want me to do that to *you*?"

"I wouldn't climb this lighthouse all alone," Zoe reasoned. "I'm terrified of heights."

"Please just be quiet!" Garet yelled at them both, running his hands nervously through his hair. "I can barely *stand* all this water!"

"Uh, guys," Ivan said hesitantly, and the others turned to look at him. Suddenly noticing what was in the room with them, they gasped. A giant statue of a woman with hands folded and a sparkling red stone on her chest sat across a rectangular pond with a half-submerged pedestal in it. Directly in front of Ivan was a pillar of a sort with writing engraved on it.

"What does it say?" Zoe asked, as she and the others gathered around the pillar.

"It says, 'He who honors the heart of the goddess shall stand at the center of all, like a swan in the center of a rippling pond," Ivan read, his voice growing more confused by the moment.

"Then that statue must represent the goddess, whoever she is, and that flashing red jewel is her heart. But how do we 'honor the goddess's heart'? We can't even get across the water!" Isaac stopped, face red in frustration.

"Not like we *want* to cross the water," Garet muttered. "Or at least, *I* don't!"

"I'm with you there, buddy," said Forge, appearing on Garet's shoulder. The Djinni shivered. "What possessed me, to come popping out like this in the *Mercury* Lighthouse?! Am I crazy?"

"I really hope that was one of those questions where you don't want an answer," Garet shot back, and with a red flash Forge disappeared.

"Come on," Isaac said finally. "There's another door… wait…there are *two* other doors!"

"Well, then let's split up," Ivan said rationally. "It's not like any of us will be alone."

"Well…I don't really like that idea much…but it does make sense," Isaac conceded finally. "Alright, Zoe, you and Ivan take the right door, and Garet and I will take the left one."

"Alright," Ivan said aloud, but groaned inwardly. *I have to try my luck with* her, *of all people,* he thought bitterly. Sighing, he switched his Shaman's Rod to his left hand, his dominant hand, and walked through the right door, Zoe right behind him. Isaac and Garet, shoulder to shoulder, walked through the left door.

The two groups found themselves face-to-face with each other almost instantly. "Guess we could have taken either door," Ivan said sheepishly. Isaac grinned and ruffled Ivan's hair, causing the Jupiter Adept to glare at him fiercely. Isaac only grinned wider. They walked slowly and a bit warily through the next door.

Across a short channel of water in this room was a doorway leading to a set of stairs. Garet, knowing what they would have to do, looked a little green at the thought.

"Water never bothered you like this before," Isaac said, raising an eyebrow at his friend.

"There's never been so much of it before. It's like it's constantly pressing down on me…like I'm going to drown." Garet shivered. "But let's keep going. The sooner we get out of this place, the better." Gritting his teeth, Garet was the first to leap from their platform to the nearly-waterlogged

pedestal, and from there to the dry area with the door and stairs. The others quickly followed, Ivan casting one last glance at the way out. He had the feeling that, once they climbed those stairs, there was no turning back.

Climbing the stairs put them in a hallway, though almost directly in front of them was a turn. Isaac had the feeling they would come to many blind corners like this. Slowly they went around the first turn, collectively breathing a sigh of relief when they found nothing lying in wait. Nothing was around the next turn either.

"Isaac! Zoe! Garet! Ivan!" cried a familiar voice. Startled, the four turned. Standing there was Mia, looking very frustrated but also more than a little excited. "You don't know how happy I am to see you!"

"What are you doing, Mia?" Zoe asked angrily. Mia, startled, took a step back. "Climbing this lighthouse all alone in the dead of night, with who-knows-what waiting inside?! You could be *killed*! I'd think you had more sense than that!"

"Well I…you see…" Mia looked at a loss for words. Finally she shrugged. "Well, anyway, I can't get any farther." She pointed to a statue that was identical to the ones in the entrance hall: A woman with long blue hair pouring a jug. It was across a narrow chasm, blocking the only route across.

"I can move it," Isaac said, with a glance at Garet. "If you promise one thing, that is."

"What?" Mia asked. At that moment, she was desperate to beat whoever it was to the top of the lighthouse and stop them from lighting it.

"Stay with us. Don't rush up ahead all alone or run off somewhere by yourself."

"Agreed. I think I'll like climbing this lighthouse with the four of you anyway. You're all very powerful Adepts." Isaac nodded to her and stood on the edge of the gap, facing the statue. He held a hand out towards it and whispered, "Move." Instantly a Psynergetic hand grasped the statue and pulled it towards Isaac, filling the gap and allowing them to walk across.

They did so, being careful not to slip on the statue. Around another blind curve was a doorway. "One question," Ivan muttered. "*Why* is there always missing floor between us and the next room? Huh?!"

"Don't know. Must be some weird 'fate' thing," Garet muttered back. "And don't even think about frying my head, little Jupiter boy. Won't work in a place devoted entirely to water."

"I'd already reached *that* conclusion," Ivan said with a wicked grin before he took his turn jumping the hole in the floor. "Honestly, are *all* the Fire Adepts as dense as you?"

"No," Isaac and Zoe said in unison, causing everyone except Garet to laugh. Still laughing, they walked through the door. The room they entered silenced all laughter.

Most of the floor was nothing but one immense grating, obviously there to let water from the three towering waterfalls fall through to a lower level. Slowly and cautiously, the five Adepts walked into the room. Mia, obviously unafraid, walked right out onto the grating and reached a hand into the waterfall. Without warning, a strange creature leapt from the tumbling water and let out an inhuman shriek.

"A Siren!" Mia gasped, backing away quickly. The creature grinned wickedly, tossing its long, blood-red hair with a hand tipped in long, sharp, green-tinged fingernails. Suddenly, it jumped at Ivan, who dodged out of the way well before those nails would have found their mark.

"Pays to be fast," he said with a grin.

"It also pays to be smart! For Mars's sake, *duck Ivan*!" Garet yelled, and Ivan ducked a split-second before the Siren's deadly nails would have found his throat. As it was, they grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked—hard.

"Yaaaaaaaah!" Ivan yelled. "Le'go of my head!" Frantically he beat at the Siren's arm with the Shaman's Rod, which was abruptly yanked from his hands and used to beat him over the head. With a final cry, Ivan slumped, unconscious.

"Flint unleash!" Isaac yelled, and the Djinni dove on the Siren, backed by all the power of Venus. The blow was enough to cause the Siren to let go of Ivan's hair and shriek in pain, dropping the Shaman's Rod.

"Fizz unleash!" came Mia's voice, and the Mercury Djinni dissolved into a soft blue light, which descended upon Ivan, now laying knocked out on the floor. As the light slowly faded, Ivan's eyes opened, and he immediately reached for the Shaman's Rod, raising it high as he stood and slamming it down on the Siren's head. The creature opened its mouth, but to all appearances no sound came out.

Gasping and falling to her knees, Zoe clamped her hands over her ears, but still the sound of the Siren's unnatural screech filled her ears. She felt numb, unable to move, unable to think, unable to even breathe. Her one quick glance at the others had told her that they heard

nothing. She felt herself suffocating, knew that it would all end here, and accepted her end without a fight. And in that moment, a memory came to her.

A forest. People. Her friends, they were. One of them was smiling. The others were serious. So serious. But then their game was serious. A girl with shoulder-length brown hair took a blue hat—baseball cap—from Zoe's head and put it on her own. She said something, and the others laughed quietly.

Somewhere far away, she heard a voice yell, "Vorpal Slash!" and suddenly the shrieking ceased. Zoe realized she had been screaming as well, and suddenly her arms gave out and she slumped towards the floor, only to find herself being caught by a strong, reassuring pair of arms.

"Whatever it was," a voice nearby said quietly, "it's over now. Everything's ok, Zoe." That voice. She knew that voice. But she was having so much trouble remembering… she knew that voice, but she couldn't place it in her slowly lightening mind.

"Come on Zoe, say something," said a different voice. "Please." This voice was almost begging her, she realized. But *who was talking to her*?

"Zoe," another voice broke in, and this one she knew instantly, as well as she knew the accompanying hand that touched her shoulder. *Isaac*, her brain told her, and slowly she turned her eyes to him. "The Siren is gone. You're ok. Stand up and shake it off." Though she desperately wanted to stay here, held in someone's—Garet's—strong grip, she could not deny the command in Isaac's voice. She stood.

"Isaac, you're good," Mia said with a nod of approval. "Even *I* haven't gotten the whole voice thing down."

"I've had a lot of practice," Isaac replied with a grin, throwing a quick glance at Garet.

"Hey!" Garet said with a laugh, playfully shoving Isaac. "Stop that!"

"Are we here to start a shoving match or climb a lighthouse?" Ivan asked impatiently. His arms were folded, his Shaman's Rod clutched in one hand. He stood in front of the doorway into the next room.

Garet, about to come back with a sharp reply, suddenly realized just how close he was standing to the waterfalls and edged warily to the edge of the room that was real floor and not metal grating. In single file the five walked through the door, Isaac going first and Mia last.

The next room got a collective groan from everyone. Almost instantly Isaac knew it was a maze, and a maze of water pipes at that. "We'll have to push them, I guess," he said with a heavy sigh.

"I remember this," Mia said. "You have to get the pipes so that the water flows evenly through them. That's how you get through the room."

"Then lets get pushing," Garet said resignedly. Placing both his hands against a free section of pipe, he heaved against it. "A little help here?" he asked agitatedly, and Isaac and Zoe both began to push with him. Slowly the pipe slid into place between two unconnected sections, and their way was cleared. Water was now shooting from little pipe jets.

They soon found that the water propelled them along a series of twists and turns within the pipe maze. Going down and up more stairs than Ivan liked to think about, they

soon found themselves pushing the same pipe back into its original position so they could get to the next part of the maze.

"Whoever designed this lighthouse was cunning indeed," Ivan said at one point. "Though they could have done *without* the stairs."

"Somehow I get the feeling this is a repeat performance?" Mia asked, startling a laugh and a nod from Zoe. Still, as Mia caught Zoe's eyes, something didn't seem quite right to the Mercury Adept. Something dark lurked there, behind Zoe's cheerful attitude.

"Well would you look at that!" Isaac said in mock surprise. "A *doorway* of all things!"

"Oh very funny, Isaac," Garet said. Despite his happy demeanor earlier, he was still looking a bit green. In that instant Zoe knew she could not be a Fire Adept, or she would feel the pressure of this lighthouse just as much as Garet did.

In the next room, they found themselves facing a fork. One side led into a series of blind turns, the other to a chasm that would take some serious jumping to cross.

"Well guys," Isaac said, resignation in his voice, "let's get to it."

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Somehow, all five of them fit on the single pedestal in the room with the giant statue. Though Ivan had to lean on Zoe for support because of his tiredness, they had somehow made it through a hole in the floor and onto the

platform in the water. Directly across from them was the giant goddess statue.

"He who honors the heart of the goddess shall stand at the center of all, like a swan at the center of a rippling pond," Mia said in a monotone, as though she had learned the words by rote. *And she probably did, being the last of the Mercury Clan*, Isaac reasoned. Balancing precariously on the edge of the pedestal, Mia leapt in one fluid motion to stand on the folded hands of the statue.

"Ply," she whispered, and a thing that Isaac could only call a spirit came forth from her outstretched hands as she glowed with Psynergy. Nodding, she jumped back to the pedestal with the others just as haloes of light surrounded them.

"What do we have to do?" Garet asked warily. "How do we get out of here?"

"Easy," Mia said, an evil smirk on her face. "We jump across the water."

"JUMP ACROSS THE WATER?!?!!?"

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Vil: Done at last! Ok guys, 50 reviews and we're set for chapter thirteen! Which has a title! Chapter Thirteen: High Water. Yay! A title! So, now, we're halfway through Mercury Lighthouse. Reviews and comments are appreciated!! ~Vil.

Chapter 14: Chapter Thirteen: High Water

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Second chapter of the climb up Mercury Lighthouse. As far as I know, the chapter after this will be mostly battle with Saturos. So, get reading!

Chapter Thirteen: High Water

"Yes, fire-boy, we jump across the water," Mia said exasperatedly.

"But we *can't*," Garet protested, brown eyes wide in what could only be fear. "I mean, it's deep…and…well…we won't be able to pull ourselves out on the other side," he said finally, believing he had found a point Mia couldn't possibly argue with.

"Don't be a baby," she said condescendingly, springing lightly off the pedestal and landing on top of the water. There was a collective gasp from the boys and Zoe. "Ok, you guys have *definitely* never been to Mercury Lighthouse before."

"Actually, it looks kind of fun," Ivan said, and he too jumped out onto the water. Lifting one foot and slamming it down caused a splash, but he never broke he surface. "Interesting. Almost like the water is solid."

"Solid water," Zoe said, jumping so she was beside Ivan and causing ripples, "is ice. And ice doesn't splash *or* ripple."

"Sure, defeat my wonderful analysis of the situation," Ivan retorted, sticking his tongue out at her. "Next thing you'll be fighting basic logic, too."

"The basic logic that says we're too dense to walk on water?" Zoe shot back with a grin. Ivan groaned and hit the heel of his hand against his forehead. "That's what I thought."

"Are you coming or not?" Mia asked from the outside walkway of the room. Zoe and Ivan easily hopped across, with Isaac only a few steps behind. Garet, however, remained on the pedestal.

"Come on, Mars boy, you won't sink," Mia said, and Garet glared at her. Tentatively, he stepped down onto the water. When he didn't sink, he seemed to get his attitude back and hopped proudly across.

"And did I mention you only have three jumps before the spell wears off?" Mia asked just as Garet launched into his fourth jump, one that would have landed him on the floor if he hadn't stopped in midair at Mia's words.

"I *what*?!" he asked, then yelped as he fell down and sank to the bottom of the deep pool.

"Garet!" Isaac cried, nearly diving in after him. Garet's head came back up suddenly, and he swam to the side. After a moment, Zoe cast Flight to lift him out of the water, and he sat against the wall, soaking wet and not liking it.

"You could have told be *before* I started out," he muttered as they made their way back to the room full of water.

"But then you'd never have started across, because you wouldn't have thought you'd make it in three jumps," Zoe said, and Garet, about to fire an angry comeback, stopped himself when he realized Zoe was right. If he had known he had a limited chance to get across, he would still be standing on that pillar.

Both he and Zoe, unknown to each other, shot a furtive glance back at Mia, who neither noticed nor cared at the moment. Something about the feeling of the lighthouse had suddenly changed.

"Ok, when the pillar we jump to glows, what does that mean?" Isaac asked, snapping Mia out of her thoughts.

"What? Oh! Uh, that is, that means that pillar will grant you three chances to get to the next landing space. But only three. The magic of Mercury Lighthouse will warp you back to the starting point if you fall in before you get to a dry spot."

"Oh that's nice. Four jumps and you have to start all over," Garet muttered. "Not that it matters. I'm already wet."

"Wet suits you," Ivan said with a smirk. "Makes your hair look like hair and not like an explosion gone bad."

"You want me to push *you* in?" Garet threatened, and Ivan just smiled.

"Unlike you," he said, grin never faltering, "*I* don't have a natural aversion to water. Now, if you asked me to walk through *sand*..." At this Ivan shuddered. "Totally unthinkable."

"Can we just get going?" Isaac said, irritated.

"Sure thing buddy," Garet said. "As long as *you* go first."

Not bothering to reply, Isaac jumped out onto the pedestal. Sighting another glowing one off to his right, he carefully judged the distance and managed to land on it with his fourth jump. One at a time the others followed his path around the room, until they were on the floor in the northwest corner of the room.

"Lets just hope nothing's waiting for us around this corner," Ivan said, walking around it and almost right into a line of five blue blobs with spiked on their heads and beady little red eyes.

"Yuck! Oozes!" he cried, backing away. "*Disgusting*!"

"Oh come on, little baby," Zoe chided, taking one down with a swing of her longsword. "They're not that hard to—YAH!" she yelled as another one slammed into her back with its spiked head. "Ok, that's it, I've had enough!" she yelled, whirling and slicing straight through the one that had hit her.

"Ok…that was a little different," Garet muttered, blasting two of the oozes with a Flare Wall. Isaac quickly unleashed Flint on one, while Ivan turned Gust on the other one. Mia, acting on impulse, began smashing the other one with her witch's wand.

Zoe, seeing Mia's attack, spun around in a complete circle, sword outstretched, and cut the final ooze in half. With a smug smile she slid the sword back into the sheath that she wore on her back. The others stared at her for a moment, then Isaac shrugged and walked on, jumping across another short channel of water and walking through the next door, the others quickly following.

Again Mia looked at Zoe, now behind her, and again something about her friend's violet eyes bothered her. Something just didn't sit right about the way Zoe was acting.

"We've already been in this room," Garet pointed out helpfully as he came through the door, last of the group.

"I think we noticed that," Gust muttered, appearing on Ivan's shoulder. "Mind you, Mars boy, I didn't say anything that Ivan wasn't thinking."

"Gust!" Ivan cried in protest, but before he could say anything more, Gust disappeared in a flash, her giggle fading as the twinkling purple light did.

"Come on, guys, we've got more water to cross," Isaac said, sighing. The others groaned inwardly (except Garet, who made no attempt to hide his feelings about water in large amounts) and followed Isaac through to the next room.

****

"We have to do *what*?!" Garet asked in shock and horror.

"Through the waterfall. Under it, really," Mia amended, a sly grin slowly spreading over her face. "It's the only way to get higher up the lighthouse."

"We've been pushing statues and pipes around *all night*, plus beating up that mutant treasure chest—"

"Mimic, actually," Ivan cut in. "And we did get some Water of Life out of it."

"—AND whatever else jumps out at us from behind corners or hidden underwater, and we've already gone through waterfalls *already* and I'm sick of it!"

"I'm sure you are," Mia said with a smirk.

"Thank Mars you went in by yourself for that Djinni?" Garet asked, fear edging into his voice. "What did you call that thing? Hail?"

"*Sleet*, Garet. Though what would you know of Mercury things."

"Actually, it's often beneficial to study the strategies and weaknesses of something that has power over you," Ivan pointed out in his best sage-like voice.

"Well said, and agreed," Mia acknowledged. "Now just go on with it, Garet, and go through the waterfall."

"Only if you go—" Garet started to say, but was cut off by another sound, this one louder than the adepts could deal with. Ivan and Zoe fell to their knees, and Mia barely managed to stand, supported by her witch's wand. Isaac and Garet fought the noise, knowing full well what was coming. They were not very surprised when three Sirens leapt from three adjacent waterfalls and faced the Adepts. Ivan, Zoe and Mia pulled themselves back into standing positions.

We're worn out, Isaac realized as he looked quickly at the others. *It must be close to dawn, the end of a night we've spent climbing the lighthouse after a day in the cold of Imil, instead of sleeping like we should have. I just* had *to bring us chasing after Mia.*

Ivan, though fighting not to fall asleep on his feet, raised the Shaman's Rod, fighting the urge to just beat the

things senseless and instead recalling something he'd once heard, about channeling power through an object to amplify its magnitude.

"Wind Seer's Storm Ray!" he yelled, focusing with everything he had on the staff he held in his hands. An immense electric charge shot from the tip of it, throwing Ivan backwards with its force, but striking all three Sirens and causing them to scream at an almost ultrasonic level. Ivan, his head making solid contact with the wall, fell hard to the ground, and there was a cracking sound, almost like a twig snapping, though a quick glance revealed that that Shaman's Rod lay unbroken.

"Ivan!" Zoe cried, and suddenly it was as though she watched the battle from the sidelines, watched as the Sirens descended upon the rest of them, shrieking, clawing and using their own forms of Psynergy. One by one the adepts fell, first Garet, weak against water, then Mia, distracted by Ivan, and then herself, standing as though nothing at all was happening. And then, all three of the Sirens turned on Isaac, claws whirling and water Psynergy blasting.

And then they screamed. The image Zoe saw, of Isaac, dead on the grating of the room of waterfalls, torn, scratched, scraped and broken, his eyes and mouth open in one final, horrified scream, burned itself into her mind. And she let loose with a scream of her own.

The vision shattered then, and she found herself back in her own body, miraculously alive and somewhat well, with Isaac and Garet on either side of her, and Mia slightly behind. All alive. And the Sirens' screech dying down, fading as they smirked evilly at Zoe, knowing the visions and confusion they had brought.

Zoe saw in a flash what Ivan had done, and was convinced she could do something like it. Close to exhaustion, she drew her longsword slowly with both hands as Isaac and Garet called on their respective Psynergies to fight the Sirens. Mia, with a hurried glance back at Ivan, came on with an attack of her own, calling Murk from her witch's wand.

Zoe barely noticed as one of the Sirens disappeared, defeated. Forgetting the sword for a moment, she threw a hand skyward and called, "Explorer's Storm!" causing lightning bolts and electrically charged water to zap the Sirens, defeating yet another one. But something about the attack was wrong, Mia noticed. The lightning was dark, instead of bright. Zoe's eyes were growing darker as well, with every passing second losing their violet hue and passing to black.

"I summon the spirit of Venus, power of the Earth!" Isaac screamed, and the great yellow Venus summons took out the final Siren. "End of story," Isaac finished wearily, sinking to the floor and leaning back against a wall.

Mia hurried to Ivan, but stumbled halfway there and fell, landing and not moving. Garet, too, was exhausted, too tired to move from his position against the wall opposite Isaac. Only Zoe still stood, one hand still on the hilt of her half-drawn sword.

She felt the darkness taking her. And she knew that Mia had seen, that Mia had some idea of what was happening. "One last chance," Zoe muttered, and knew in that moment what she would do.

Drawing the sword, she held it high, practically collapsing from lack of sleep but forcing herself not to waver.

"Please work," she whispered. "By Sol, this had better work," she amended, gritting her teeth and beginning to call her power into the sword.

"Sol's Light," she whispered, and golden light radiated from the sword, and for a few moments Zoe was suspended in the air. Isaac, Garet, Mia and Ivan felt the light, felt their injuries and weariness fade and disappear, their power and strength return, and watched as the shining glow faded and revealed Zoe, kneeling on the ground with the sword clutched tightly in both hands. Slowly and shakily she sheathed it, then turned to face the others.

Her eyes were an empty, merciless black. Mia gasped, getting up, but Ivan's hand on her shoulder stopped her from approaching Zoe. For a moment, Zoe's eyes became violet again, and in that moment she spoke.

"Keep going. Through the waterfall. It's the only way."

"Then lets do it," Isaac said, and he and Garet lifted Zoe and walked with her between them through the waterfall. On the other side, the spray of the falls created a colorful rainbow, and as Mia and Ivan passed through there was a collective gasp.

A statue similar to all the others in Mercury Lighthouse, and yet very different, stood off to one side. Mia approached it, touched it lightly and said, "Ply." The spirit-fairy danced around the statue and there was a tremor and a grinding noise. As the five adepts looked on, the water in the waterfall began to flow upwards.

"Well, come on," Isaac said, and he and Garet (complaining as usual), carrying Zoe, stepped into the waterfall and were carried skyward. Mia and Ivan followed quickly, rising with the torrent of water.

In seconds, the five adepts were unconscious on the very peak of the Mercury Lighthouse.

****

Vil: Well, how was it? Hmmm? You better review now if you want the Saturos battle chapter. *laughs* Or any chapters following. So, I'll leave you to your reviewing…coming up is chapter fourteen: Shining Strike. Oh, by the way, I need 55 reviews to keep going.

Chapter 15: Chapter Fourteen: Shining Strike

As Luck Would Have It

Feonyx: I've already talked to you about all that. I might say good job, but I might say try again, and I might say nothing at all…except GS2 *has* to come out sooner!

Griffinkhan: Actually, I'm not sure if Zoe knew about Golden Sun beforehand. As far as I know, she didn't, but then you never can tell when characters run wild like she has.

spectralstorm: Zoe is not the starring role in this chapter, nor is she meant to be the starring role in this ficcy. That is all.

A/N: At long last! Chapter 14! Sorry it took so long, but first I lost my gameboy, then my puter broke, and THEN I had this sleepover to go to…you get the picture. Anyway, here I am with the Saturos Battle! I have obviously exceeded the 55 reviews I needed, but hey, things happen.

Phoenix: You're excited about this Saturos thing?

Vilya: *shoves her other self away from the puter* yes, I am. Now, here we go!

Chapter Fourteen (YAY!): Shining Strike

Mia was the first to open her eyes. The sky above her was dark still, the stars bright spots against the blackness of night. Slowly she sat up, finding herself facing a greyish-orange sky.

"The sunrise," she whispered. She had not thought her voice was loud, but the instant she said those words the other four Adepts sat up as well. As one they stood, facing the sunrise together.

As the light broke over the horizon, Mia saw a dark shadow forming to her right. About to cry out, she saw whatever it was vanish in the full light of the sun, which burned away all darkness with its pure radiance.

Of course, though it was nothing compared to the beautiful colors of sunrise, the blue flash and glow of the beacon of Mercury Lighthouse being lit immediately caught the Adepts' attention. Mia felt immense power flowing through her as she turned to glare at the giant orb of liquid flames dancing above the pit of the lighthouse.

"There goes plan A," Garet remarked, drawing his sword. "And I think plan B will be taking a jump out the fourteenth-floor window sometime soon," he added as a figure emerged from behind one of the four Mercury statues surrounding the pit.

Ivan picked up a purple stone that sat on the elevator-type floor they had ridden up. Instantly it flashed, and a bright light surrounded all five of them, restoring their Psynergy to full power.

"We have to jump across the floating platforms," Mia said with certainty. "That takes us to the main spire…where the light is."

"Also where the mysterious shadowy figure is," Ivan put in.

"That's not mysterious," Isaac said flatly. "That's Saturos." Without another word, he jumped onto the first

platform, then took a flying leap to the next one. Garet followed, somewhat more clumsily, and Mia behind him. Zoe was reluctant to jump, seeing just how far up she was.

"For Jupiter's sake," Ivan said in an annoyed tone, "you can *fly*. *Why* are you afraid of heights?" Having no good answer, Zoe forced herself not to look down as she jumped across, Ivan following close behind.

When all of them were safely on the main spire, they began climbing the large set of stairs, their only way to reach Saturos and end this. Before they had climbed the whole way however, a familiar voice startled them.

"Isaac! Garet!" cried a girl's voice, and the adepts turned to see who it was.

"Jenna!" they cried in unison. Then, seconds later, "Felix!"

"Confused!" Ivan muttered, and in his mind he heard Gust's giggle.

"You're still alive?" asked a tall woman with bright yellow hair. She sneered at the adepts, then turned to the three people she stood with. "I'm going to finish them off once and for all!"

"Menardi, wait!" said a voice from behind the spinning globe of Mercury. "I'll do it. You can't leave our hostages alone, can you?"

"I guess not," Menardi said thoughtfully. Without another audible word, she, Felix, Jenna, and an old man disappeared on the down platform.

"Isaac! Garet! Don't die!" came back a voice, the voice of the old man.

"Kraden," Garet whispered, fire in his eyes. He turned angrily to Saturos. "Come on, you vile slug! Stop being a coward and just fight!"

"Very well then…though this will be so easy it won't even pose a challenge…" Saturos said arrogantly, approaching them with a sauntering gait. Halfway there, he turned around and looked perplexedly at the lighthouse beacon.

"Stop stalling!" Garet was yelling. Saturos frowned and turned his red-eyed glare on the adepts, who promptly moved all the way up the stairs, to put the battle on fair ground.

"Then let's fight," Saturos hissed, his voice sounding more like a snake's might.

"Flint unleash!" Isaac yelled, and the Djinni appeared in a great flash of golden light, diving on Saturos with a loud battle cry.

"Fever unleash!" Garet's voice called, and the Mars Djinni became a swirling flame, wrapping around Saturos and burning him. Or trying to.

"Foolish boy!" Saturos yelled, triumph in his eyes. "I am an adept of Mars! You cannot harm me!"

"If you are a Mars Adept, then the power of the Mercury Lighthouse weakens your Psynergy!" Ivan retorted, seconds before adding, "Gust unleash!" The fury of Jupiter struck the villain full in the face.

"Mars Adept, huh?" Mia asked, a wicked grin on her face. "Let's see how you handle Mercury Psynergy! Sleet unleash!" Water drenched Saturos, causing him to cry out and wipe frantically at his face. Glaring with beady red eyes, he raised a hand above his head.

"Psynergy attack coming up!" Ivan warned, then, "Garet, *duck*!" as Saturos' Heat Flash headed straight for the Mars Adept. Garet merely shrugged the fire off, grinning at Saturos as only Garet could.

"And you called *me* stupid? I'm a Mars Adept too, slimebrain, and your pathetic Psynergy has about as much effect on me as a drop of water has on a mountain." Garet's grin disappeared, however, as Saturos drew his sword.

"If Psynergy won't take you, then perhaps a blade will!" Saturos yelled, the point of his sword headed straight for Garet's neck. Garet, in a split-second reaction, jumped, and instead of his neck the sword ran him through the stomach.

"GARET!" Isaac yelled. Mia instantly moved to Garet's aid as Saturos turned on Zoe, who had just pulled her longsword from its sheath.

"Thanks for the trick, Ivan!" she called to him, focusing her power into her weapon. "Explorer's Storm!" she yelled, and a great bolt of lightning struck Saturos, who appeared shocked to say the least.

"I summon the spirit of Jupiter, power of the Wind!" Ivan yelled, crying out victoriously as the summoned Jupiter struck Saturos from behind.

"Gah! FIREBALL!" Saturos yelled, his words more of a roar than actual words. Giant balls of flame rained down on

the Adepts, one striking Zoe's leg and causing her to collapse, no longer able to stand.

"Squire's Spire!" Isaac said, watching as a gigantic earthen spire crashed on top of Saturos.

"Eruption!" Saturos shot back, a great column of fire spurting from the ground at Isaac's feet. He shot into the air, then fell to the ground, limp, burned, and unmoving.

Mia could hardly watch this. She had unlimited Psynergy from the newly-lit Mercury Lighthouse, but so many things were happening at once that she could barely keep her head from spinning. Then the hot wind of the eruption attack blasted towards her, so strong that it blew her to the edge of the lighthouse. She caught herself, and dangled there, hanging onto the edge for dear life.

"All alone, little boy," Saturos mocked Ivan. Ivan only glared and sent his Plasma Psynergy into his Shaman's Rod, amplifying the attack tenfold. Saturos, visible weakened, countered with an attack of his own, knowing he would last far longer than would the young man fighting him.

The volleys of Psynergy attacks continued for quite a while, until Ivan finally felt himself losing his control. His vision was becoming blurry, his powers weaker, and he was hardly unable to stand. And there was nothing and no one to draw power from.

Sighing in defeat, he glanced back at his friends. Zoe, unconscious from the pain of her burns, sprawled on the ground a few feet away. Isaac, burned to a near crisp, looking for all the world like he was dead. Garet, staked on Saturos' sword barely alive. Mia, gone over the edge of the lighthouse, maybe gone for good.

Even if somehow they were all still alive, Saturos would kill them once he was through with Ivan. And Ivan couldn't just let his friends die like that.

A tremendous power took hold in him then. He felt it, a feeling like being hit with one of his own lightning bolts, shocking and empowering him to the very core of his being. And he found the strength to say two final words.

"SHINING STRIKE!" Ivan yelled, throwing both hands to the sky and sinking to his knees. Great golden bursts of electricity shot from the sky, taking Saturos down after three hits. Still the bolts came, until finally Ivan collapsed from exhaustion, out of power and energy completely.

Mia dragged herself up over the edge of Mercury Lighthouse in time to see another blue-haired man helping Saturos to stand. She recognized this man instantly.

"Alex," she said coldly, meeting his eyes with a chilling stare.

"Mia," he said in the same tone. "You would never be able to finish Saturos off. I take my leave of you." Without another word, he was gone.

Confused and a bit taken aback by Alex's attitude, Mia turned her thoughts to more important matters. The first person her eyes lit on was Isaac, and she knelt beside him, fingers feeling for a pulse in his neck and finding none.

"Oh no," she whispered. "Gone. They're all…already gone. I don't deserve to be a healer. I let them down. I couldn't stop them from lighting the lighthouse. I've failed my clan, failed in my duty…and failed my friends."

"That's not true," whispered a hoarse voice. Garet's voice, Mia realized. "Don't sit feeling sorry for yourself. Get up and do something about it."

Mia smiled a little and stood. She was going to do something about it. First, however, she had to figure out how to get four badly injured and possibly dead adepts off the top of the lighthouse.

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Vil: should I leave them at a cliffhanger like this, not knowing who's dead, if anyone?

Kaede: Si, senorita. Esta muy bueno!

Vil: Nah, I don't think I will. Lea would have my head. So on we go.

****

The first thing he noticed when he came to was that he wasn't hurt anywhere. That meant they must have won. Saturos had been defeated.

He could hear Mia's voice, talking to what sounded like one or the other of her Djinn. And Zoe's voice, too, answering some question Mia had asked.

Slowly, wanting this peaceful moment to last forever, he opened his eyes. Mia instantly noticed and sent him a warm smile.

"How do you feel?" she asked. Zoe sighed exasperatedly and shook her head.

"You are a Mercury Adept through and through," she said, making him laugh. He had been thinking the same thing himself.

"Where's Garet?" he asked, sitting up. He was obviously at an Inn, and, judging from the snow outside, still in Imil.

"Sleeping in another room," Mia said, her smile darkening some.

"And…Isaac?" Ivan asked, purple eyes intent. Isaac was the only one missing. Could he truly be…gone?

"Isaac is—" Zoe began, but was interrupted by the opening of the door to their room.

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Vil: let's stop HERE!

Kaede: now look, chica. You had your chance to stop, and you didn't take it. Ahora, you're gonna live with it.

Vil: Oh *fine*…

****

Through the door walked Isaac, alive and well, and, to Ivan's relief, smiling broadly.

"—right here," Zoe finished lamely. She fought the urge to jump up and hug Isaac. He had looked so terrible, burned by Saturos' fire.

"Also lucky," Mia pointed out.

"And ready to go, when you guys are," Isaac added. Before they could protest, he held up a hand. "There are rumors of forests going wild and destroying entire towns. Don't look at me that way Ivan. Anyway, they say the mayor of Bilibin is hiring warriors to go and see what's up. And I figure, this cold isn't the ideal thing, so why don't we go?"

"Leave Imil?" Mia asked, eyes wide. "Well…I suppose, with the Fountain of Hermes flowing again, I'm not needed here as much as I have been. And Megan and Justin can see to whatever might go wrong. I have faith in them. So yes, I'll go."

"Tomorrow then?"

"*Tomorrow*?!" Zoe and Ivan cried in unison.

"We should go soon. If the situation is as serious as it sounds, then we can't waste time."

"Well I guess…" Zoe trailed off with a heavy sigh.

"I'll go and say goodbye to Megan and Justin," Mia said, rising and leaving the room. Ivan, head now spinning at all the important decisions that had just taken place within the course of a minute, did not mind at all as he crashed back onto his pillow and fell into a sound sleep.

****

Vil: End of chapter fourteen! Next chapter…will be a surprise! MUAHAHAHAHAHA!

Kaede: you're scaring me. Anyway, we wanna acknowledge Feonyx, author of Golden Sun Redux, for the fourteenth-floor window bit, that title back there about 'very very unlikely' (which Vil forgot was even IN one of his fics) and a number

of other ideas that we can't find at the moment. But do go read GS: Redux. It's humor. Good humor.

Vil: And keep watching for the first part of Kaede's ficcy, which should be coming soon.

Kaede: Now, here comes that magic arrow again! And kudos to Alex for getting Isaac that dry-erase board!

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Chapter 16: Chapter Fifteen: Back to Bilibin

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Hello again! Boy you guys reviewed fast. Almost faster then I can get these out. Not that I'm asking you to slow down ;).

Claimer: I claim ownership of Zap! Yay! Don't know Zap? You will ;).

PennilessPoet: I believe you. Which is why he's not dead.

Feonyx: I made Shining Strike up, out of my own head. Wasn't originally meant for Ivan, but it did the job.

Jupiter Girl: You are both right and wrong at the same time. Only the two authors listed above know what I mean, because they guessed correctly. And Kaede knows. But tell me, why do you think it can't be Mercury or Mars?

Griffinkhan: Writer's block. Only, in my case, it was writer's giant wall made of steel, brick and thorny vines. But I got over it. And here I am!

Chapter Fifteen: Back to Bilibin

The Adepts left early the next morning. A light snow was falling, and the others watched as Isaac went a little crazy.

"It's snowing!" he was calling, running around in odd circles. "It's really snowing! Yeah!"

"Um, Isaac," Garet said as he rubbed his near-frozen hands together, teeth chattering. "You are a *Venus* Adept, remember? Earth, plants, rocks, mud maybe? *Not* snow. Not water of any kind. That is Mia's job."

"Yes, but it's *snow*, Garet! Snow! And it's falling, and hitting the ground, and all around me…it's so *wonderful*! A little cold, perhaps, but you don't know what you're missing!"

"I don't *want* to know," Garet said, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and shivering. "This is not the weather for a Mars Adept."

"It *is* cold," Zoe said. "Not unbearably so, but cold. Ivan?"

"Yeah Zoe?"

"*What* are you doing?"

"Snow angels."

"Ivan, you're standing on your head."

"I know it. Watch." With those words, snow was whipped up by a furious wind. The wind formed and packed the snow into the shape of a three-dimensional angel.

"Um, Ivan?" Mia asked tentatively.

"Yup?"

"Is there any particular reason you had to stand on your head for that?"

"Nope."

"Ok."

"I guess something's different. I mean…we got to beat up on Saturos, right? What could be better than that?"

"Correction," Garet said, pulling his face out of his double-wrapped scarf for a moment. "*You*, Ivan, with your wonderful zapping prowess, got to beat up on Saturos. And Isaac, with his Spire of Doom, got to beat up on Saturos. Mia, well, you got to hang out. And Zoe got to shock him some. But what did *I* do?"

"Become Mars Adept shish-kebab," Ivan said helpfully. Garet growled and buried his face again.

"How did you do it, Ivan?" Mia asked. "I mean, that cool attack. Is that some strange Jupiter Power?"

"Actually…I don't know. It just kind of…happened. I get the feeling that I wouldn't be able to do it again if I tried."

"Kraden told me about that," Isaac said, stopping his hyper running for a few seconds. "Sort of. Some kind of reaction happens between your thoughts, Psynergy, and spirit, and you get a sort of ultimate power. Only it's a last-ditch attack. Used only in life-or-death situations."

"Since meeting you guys, my entire *existence* has been a life-or-death situation."

"Well yeah, there's that. But I mean seriously."

"Then why didn't *you* do anything?" Garet asked irritably. "You were in a life-or-death situation, Isaac."

"No, Isaac was in a death situation," Mia said, her voice dropping a bit as some of the wind died down. "He was dead."

"I was?" Isaac asked in a shocked voice.

"To all intents and purposes, yes. Which is why I think you're acting this way now. You're enjoying life, and every moment and aspect of it. Though considering you didn't know you were dead, it's a bit odd, but you probably knew subconsciously."

"I don't believe it. I was…dead. But then…how am I here now?"

"It's Mia's fault," Garet muttered, the cold and wet making him more irritable than he had been inside Mercury Lighthouse.

"Mia? You did it?"

"Well…I had help," she stammered, face going even redder than it already was from the cold. "Megan and Justin, for starters…and Zoe, a little…"

"Oh stop it," Zoe said. "You put *me* to work, what was it, running back and forth and upside down for all I know, doing this and that and the other thing until my head was spinning three directions at once, and then you said 'sit and watch Ivan' and of course I did it. But you did most of the work with Isaac yourself, and you know it!"

"'Sit and watch Ivan', huh?" Ivan asked with a pout. "I'm glad to know I mean *so much* to you all."

"Well, we already knew *you* would be alright," Mia said with a grin. "You've got a hard head."

"I didn't hit my head."

"But you're still standing on it." Ivan immediately flipped onto his feet, and the adepts continued walking.

"I was dead…" Isaac said in a flat voice. He couldn't believe it. Mia and her students had brought him back to life. *Dead*, he thought again. *Like my father. Like Jenna's parents. But I couldn't bring them back.*

"It was terrible," Mia whispered, voice barely heard above the wind. "You were…fried, Isaac. I didn't think I was going to be able to do anything…but I'd already failed you all once, and I couldn't do it again."

"You did not fail us!" Ivan said indignantly. "You came through when none of the rest of us could have!"

"I might have been able to stop him from doing that to Isaac."

"You were *busy* doing what you do best!"

"Why are we arguing about this?" Isaac wondered aloud. "I mean, we all survived. Can we just please leave the past behind us?"

"Heads up!" Garet called suddenly. "Oozes coming out way!"

"*More* oozes?" Zoe complained. Oozes were not on her list of favorite monsters to fight. But then, she didn't have a list if favorite monsters to fight.

"Just two of 'em," Garet said, raising a hand and blasting one with a Flare Wall. "Well, one now."

"Barrel of laughs, Gar'," Isaac said, bringing a Spire down onto the second Ooze.

"Isaac wait!" Mia cried, but it was too late. The Ooze disintegrated, and Isaac fell to his knees. "I should have warned you!"

"Obviously," Ivan muttered. "Warned him of what?"

"That he shouldn't use Psynergy for a while…sorry, Isaac," Mia said as Isaac stood again.

"No, it's ok. Let's just hope that nothing larger than Oozes show up before we get to Bilibin. I'm pretty sure we left early enough to get there today." Isaac brushed the snow from his legs and hands, then continued walking.

"Garet?" Zoe asked, and Garet shook his head.

"You don't need to ask. Yes, he acts like he's got rocks for brains sometimes, yes, he was always such an early bird, and no, I see no change forthcoming."

"Thank you Garet."

****

"Wind Seer's Plasma!" Ivan yelled, bringing down the Will Head. They had made it to Bilibin Cave with few distractions. "Someone tell me *why* they are called Will Heads, please?"

"They *will head* wherever they want to?" Garet offered. Ivan, thinking quickly, swiped the torch he was carrying at Garet's head. Garet's crimson hair immediately ignited.

"YAH! IVAN! I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!" Garet yelled, running around screaming for a few seconds until Mia, between bursts of laughter, shot a Frost at Garet's hair, putting out the fire and turning his head to icicles.

"Hey! You look good that way! Not to mention that an inch or two off the top does wonders for your appearance," Ivan said with a friendly grin.

"I-i-it's so c-c-c-cold…" Garet muttered, teeth chattering. "M-M-Mia, what did y-y-you d-d-d-do?"

"Well, would you rather have it all burn off?" Zoe asked him, stifling a laugh when Garet shuddered even harder then he was shivering.

Mia frowned and bit her lip. Maybe she shouldn't have frozen his hair like that. He wasn't looking too good. *You're overreacting*, her mind told her. She had to agree that her mind was probably right. But still…even as they walked, she kept one eye on him. The others, aside from Garet, noticed this, but decided not to risk incurring Garet's semi-frozen wrath on Mia.

****

"Seventy billion Will-head-anywheres, five Zombies and a Ghost later," Ivan said upon emerging from Bilibin Cave. "We're all in mostly one piece. Or, five separate one pieces, if you want to be technical about it."

"My head unfroze," Garet remarked. "Though if torch-boy hadn't lit it, it wouldn't have had to freeze in the first place!"

"You were asking for it," Zoe put in. "And you know I'm right."

"Well that's a switch."

"You want to take a little ride back to Imil?"

"NO! Anything but *that*!"

"That's what I thought."

"You two!" Isaac said with a laugh. They had only a short distance to go until they reached Bilibin, and the sun was nowhere near setting. They had made good time, and would most likely be just in time for dinner at the Inn. Then sleep, which pleased Isaac to an infinite degree, and then to find out about whatever was going on with the trees near Bilibin the next day, or maybe the day after. *We* do *deserve a break once in a while*, he thought.

What surprised them all was that when they reached the Inn, Garet did not come to dinner with them. Instead, he headed up to his room silently, and slowly.

"The shock of freezer burn must have hit him," Isaac laughed, and the others laughed with him.

"Must have," Mia said quietly, though her laughter was quieter, more detached, her mind clearly focused elsewhere.

****

Garet was not at breakfast the next morning either, nor was he up when Isaac and Mia came back from the Mayor's house.

"It seems people have been turned into trees in Kolima Village by the Guardian Trees in Kolima Forest. Supposedly all because the Mayor is building a house for his

wife, and he cut wood from one of the Guardian Trees. The Mayor said we were too young to go, but no one else has been able to solve this problem, so I say lets do it! Hey, where's Garet?" Isaac asked, suddenly aware of the absence of the Mars Adept.

"Haven't seen him," Ivan said, turning his attention back to the map he had been studying. It was rather new, in fact he'd found it on a bookshelf here at the Inn, and it showed most of the major landmarks. "Isaac, there's a bridge, or a barricade, between here and Kolima *anything*."

"One of the workers told me that Bilibin Barricade was so hastily constructed, it's very unstable. We should be able to find a way through. If that sleepyhead ever gets up, that is. I'll go get him." Climbing the stairs, Isaac sighed. Garet had never been an early riser, but this was late even for *him*.

"Garet?" Isaac asked, knocking on his door. "Garet, are you awake?"

"Go away," muttered a drowsy voice. Isaac didn't know why, but there was something wrong with the sound of that voice.

"Garet, it's me, Isaac. Mia and I found out what's going on. Come on, get up, you've missed breakfast already as is!"

"I said…go…away."

"Fine. I'll go," Isaac said, suddenly placing the feeling he was getting from the tone and volume of Garet's voice. "But I'll be back." Isaac practically ran down the stairs, nearly colliding into Zoe, who stopped just short of being run down.

"Isaac, geez! You don't have to run!" she said with a sigh. "For a minute I thought something was really wrong."

"Something is," he said gravely, before leaping past her and running to where Mia and Ivan sat, the latter still puzzling over his map and the former engrossed in a book that seemed to be about different locations in Angara. "Mia!"

Startled, Mia looked up from the book, sky-blue eyes puzzled. "Isaac? What is it?"

"Garet," Isaac gasped, turning on his heel and sprinting back up the steps, Mia hot on his tail.

****

"Come on, Gar', it's not *that* terrible," Isaac said sympathetically a few hours later.

"It is so," Garet said groggily. "Mars Adepts despise cold. And I have to go and get one!"

"Oh stop it you," Mia said cheerfully. "You'll be better by tomorrow."

"Guess we're getting our little 'vacation'," Isaac said with a heavy sigh. This problem, people becoming trees, needed to be solved immediately. But Isaac knew he couldn't let Garet travel like this. And even if he hadn't known from the get-go, he would have found out, for Mia was very adamant that Garet stay where he was. Not that this made Garet any less irritable.

"Ivan, stop that!" Zoe cried as wind swirled around her. The two of them were up on one of the ledges of the town, looking out over the view. Ivan wanted to stay as far

from Garet as possible, and Zoe wanted to stay as far from sickness as possible, so they had ended up here.

"I'm not doing it! I swear by Jupiter!" Ivan called as the wind increased in speed, lifting Zoe into the air and spinning *her* around.

"Whatever you are, *stop this*!" Zoe yelled, and instantly the winds vanished. In their place, on the ground in front of Zoe, was a Jupiter Djinni.

"Hello," he said, bowing as much as his body allowed him to. "I am Zap. A Jupiter Djinni. Bound to the power of the Wind. And you are…Zoe." Instantly, the Djinni's eyes lit up. "Well, well, well. It is nice to meet you indeed, Traveler."

"Nice to bond with me you mean," Zoe said mockingly. "But…Traveler?"

"Yes, Traveler. Now. I trust Torrent has found you? The Elemental Spirits were very explicit in their instruction."

"I'm right here, you old stick in the mud," Torrent said, flashing onto Zoe's head. Zap, satisfied, nodded, and both Djinn flashed out again.

"What?" Ivan asked, and Zoe shrugged. She really had no idea. But her confusion was quickly replaced with elation. She had two Djinn!

"Come on. Lunch is almost ready, I bet," she said, walking with a spring in her step. "And without Garet there, we may actually get to eat some of the food!"

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Two days and a lot of complaining from Garet later, the Adepts were ready to head to Kolima Forest. "Even if we have to knock it down!" Ivan proclaimed excitedly.

"You are *not* knocking down any trees!" Isaac said quickly, and Ivan laughed.

"I am not climbing anything higher than my head," Zoe said fervently. "After Mercury Lighthouse, I don't think I can stand sitting on a high chair."

"You can't stand and sit at the same time anyway," said Zap's voice.

"You're always *so* helpful."

"I try."

"At least it's warmer here than it was in Imil."

"*That* would be Garet," said Mia as she came down the stairs of the Inn. "Always one for the tropical climate. I suppose when we hit Mars Lighthouse you'll be ragging on me as much as is Garet-ly possible?"

"Darn right."

"Let's just get going," Isaac said with a laugh. "I mean —"

"*We know*," Zoe said exasperatedly. "You're going to say, 'while there's still daylight left'. Isaac, it's an hour past dawn. I don't even think the monsters are awake yet. And from here to Kolima is open ground. *We will not run out of time*!"

"Ok, ok. Sheesh." And on that note, the Adepts headed out the door, against the Mayor's orders, for the Bilibin Barricade and points beyond.

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Kaede: 'points beyond.' I like that.

Vil: Well, that's it for chapter fifteen! Still having fun, I hope. Go read Feonyx's Tolbi Redux thing! It's a barrel of thunder lizards in January!

Kaede: uh…yeah. Magic arrow time! Oh and Vil wants…at least eighty reviews. That's 80. An eight and a zero. Ochenta. Now review!!

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Chapter 17: Chapter Sixteen: On the Road Again

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Ok, sorry this was so long in coming. When I got my computer back it was missing EVERYTHING—and I mean EVERYTHING—that had been on it before. I lost a lot. So here I go.

Chapter Sixteen: On the Road Again (credit to Feonyx for the title)

"Let me get this straight," Ivan said as they left Bilibin for the second time. "We're going to go talk to some trees?"

"Not quite," Isaac said, a mischievous grin on his face.

"Then, what *exactly* are we doing?"

"We're going to talk to one particular tree. As far as I know, there only *is* one talking tree."

"It's a magical forest, in a way," Mia said, smiling and letting her thoughts drift to the past. "The trees are sort of guardians of the forest. I think they're angry because YAH!"

"Because of 'yah'?" Garet asked skeptically, then realized Mia was pointing at something and followed the direction of her finger. "YAH!"

"There is an echo out here," Zoe stated decisively, heaving her longsword from its sheath and thinking she

might prefer a staff as she brought it up to meet the onrushing Rat Soldiers. "I just want to know where these oversized vermin got their armor."

"I'll give you a slight hint," Garet said as one of them charged him. "It isn't rat-made."

"That is *disgusting*, Garet!" Mia cried, whacking one of the Rat Soldiers on the head with her new mace. "Hey, I like this weapon!"

"Can we concentrate on theeeeeEEEEYAA!" Isaac yelped as one of the Rat Soldiers crashed into him, sending him flying several feet.

"Theeya. Gotcha," Garet said sarcastically, slicing one of the Rat Soldiers in two. "One down. Four to go. This is not my day, is it?"

"Must not be."

Ivan, who had been very quiet all this time, suddenly raised a hand and stared down the Rat Solders defiantly. "Wind Seer's Plasma!" he yelled. What Garet described to himself as 'advanced-scale voltage' descended from the sky, zapping three of the Rat Soldiers into nonexistence.

"Wow. Nice trick, Ivan," Zoe said with a grin. The final Rat Soldier charged at her. Feeling as though it were hopeless, she held up her sword and closed her eyes. But the Rat Soldier ran right on past her, headed for Ivan.

"Ivan, *duck*!" Garet yelled, and Ivan complied with the speed of a Jupiter Adept. The Rat Soldier, in the middle of a flying leap, couldn't stop itself, and flew into impalement on Isaac's sword.

"Nicer trick," Ivan conceded with a mocking bow.

"Stop it you," Isaac said menacingly, a wicked grin betraying his sinister tone. "Unless you *want* a pool of quicksand to suddenly appear beneath your feet?"

"Quicksand?! Mercy!" Ivan pleaded jokingly, and the other laughed. Well, all of them except Garet laughed. He seemed to be in a state of suspension.

"Garet?" Mia asked, snapping her fingers in front of his face. "Oh Mars boy?" she went on in a singsong voice. "Would you like to be wet or frosty?"

"What? Wet? Frosty? Is it snowing?" Garet asked suddenly, snapped out of whatever trance he had been in.

"Come on, marshmallow-head," Ivan said with a grin. "We have to go talk to some trees."

"I'm not a marshmallow-head!"

"Yes you are. A strawberry-flavored one."

"I AM NOT A MARSHMALLOW OF ANY FLAVOR ON THIS SIDE OF MOUNT ALEPH!" Garet yelled, making his considerably shorter hair stand on end and clenching his hands into fists. Ivan ignored this, however, pleased that he had found a means of annoyance.

"Oh really? Are you saying that, if we were to go to the other side of Mount Aleph, you would become a marshmallow? Or that you are a marshmallow, but not one of any flavor FOUND on this side of Mount Aleph? And if that's true, what flavor are you? If we were to stand on the border between this and the other side of Mount Aleph, would you be half a marshmallow? And doesn't your use of

fire brown the edges a bit sometimes?" Ivan finished with a satisfied smirk.

Garet stared, mouth open in shock, for the first time in his life stunned speechless. Needless to say, the Adepts readily welcomed the change.

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"Well here we are," Zoe said. The wooden construct that was Bilibin Barricade loomed before them. It *did* look rather poorly made, but it was obviously not easy to knock down.

"There's a door. We can just go through that way," Isaac said confidently, walking up to it and pushing. When the door didn't open, he pushed harder. When the door still didn't open, he considered ramming it, but decided it wasn't worth the effort."

"The hinges," Ivan observed, "are on our side of the door. That means if we want to open the door, we should pull it." Stepping around Isaac, Ivan took hold of the doorknob and pulled hard. The door didn't budge."

"Or not," Garet said with a snicker.

"Then the door is locked, and there is no way through," Ivan surmised, sitting on a rock near the gate.

"There's a sign," Mia said, standing in front of a large wooden message board. "It says 'this area is off limits to all those without a permit. Signed Lord McCoy.' Honestly. A permit. That man isn't even a lord, he's a mayor, and he has a terrible accent at that."

"Yes but he has guards that call him lord," Isaac pointed out, dropping to the vacant rock next to Ivan.

"You sure there's no way around this barrier?" Garet asked, stepping closer to study it. "It sure looks unstable. Maybe we can Move something?"

"The door does not move," Ivan muttered.

"I meant Move as in using Psynergy. This looks loose enough," Garet mused, pointing his hand at what appeared to be a large wooden box. "Move!" The box and Garet glowed the multiple colors of Psynergy, and slowly the box moved to the side.

"Is it me, or did Mars boy just have an idea?" Mia asked, half-shocked and half-sarcastic.

"He gave the thing an order," Zoe said with a shrug. "It's what he does. I think it's the only way his brain can function?"

"What brain?"

"Point."

Standing, Isaac led the adepts through the opening and to the other side of the barricade. They found themselves staring at three trees, relatively small ones and almost identical replicas of the tree just inside Bilibin.

Ivan stepped up to one and used Mind Read. "Tree-people," he said evenly. "Or, you know, people-trees. It really doesn't matter which way you say it. Trees that were once people. This one says that she'll be swept out to sea if we don't rescue her. Tell me, who is 'she'?"

"Probably that tree out on the rock," Zoe said, pointing to where the third tree balanced precariously on a stone in the water. "But we can't step into that rushing current."

"Garet already gave us the solution," Isaac said, wading into the shallow water near the edge and holding out a hand. "Move." The tree was pulled into the shallows, where the current swirled a bit and pulled it in until it was stuck in the muddy bottom.

"Garet, solving two of our problems in one day. Now that's just a bit scary." Mia shook her head. "Almost makes you think he *has* a brain."

"What brain?" Garet asked, not having heard Mia completely because he was studying the barricade again.

"Exactly," Isaac said, and everyone except Garet laughed. "Let's go. Kolima Forest can't be that far away now."

****

"I take it back," Isaac said when they reached a fork half an hour later. Well, it wasn't technically a fork, because they did not follow a road. But there was an obvious choice of left or right.

"I think we should go right to get to Kolima," Garet said, feeling a bit proud of his finding their way through the barricade earlier.

"Then we go left," Zoe put in, and the others nodded. "Garet, you have the sense of direction of a worm."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"No, it was not."

"Why are you being mean to me?"

"I don't like trees."

"I'm not a tree. *Or* a marshmallow," he added, cutting Ivan off before he could say the words.

They continued left, which took them northeast and towards a forest made up of huge, thick trees. With one final glance back the way they had come, Garet was the first to step inside. The others followed quickly, though Ivan was tempted to change his mind. He liked trees even less than Zoe did, being a Jupiter Adept.

Upon entering the forest, Ivan got a good look around and stared, puzzled.

"What's the matter Ivan?" Garet asked.

"There's sparkly stuff on the ground," he said in a puzzled voice.

"What is it?" Zoe asked him.

"You think I know?"

"Well I can always try." She was about to say more, but there was a sudden flash, and strong waves of energy began pelting the adepts.

"Aaah! What's happening!?" Garet cried.

"My mind!" Ivan yelled, bringing his hands to his head. "Someone is attacking my—" He found he could not continue to speak.

"I…I can't…I can't even stand up!" Mia said weakly, and on cue all five of the Adepts collapsed, unable to move. The clearing in which they were standing filled with a violet light, and great shining balls of power began to fall from above.

"What is that?" Zoe asked softly. Even talking was hard after whatever had just happened.

"It's sparkling," Ivan whispered. "Could this be what turned those people into…" Realizing the implications of his thoughts, Ivan left the words unsaid. But the others got the point. "We've got to get out of here!"

"We can't even move," Isaac mumbled. "Venus knows I'm trying. And if that stuff touches us…"

"We turn into trees," Mia finished sadly.

"Not that Isaac would care," Garet muttered under his breath. He closed his eyes to wait for his fate.

None of the adepts saw as the glittering balls descended upon them. Nor did they see that they were protected by strange shields of power. And only Ivan saw that Zoe's shield was yellow while all the others' were blue.

When the light faded, the adepts opened their eyes.

"We're not trees," Zoe said in amazement.

"A barrier of some sort saved us," Ivan said. "I think I know what it was. It was our Psynergy." He decided not to mention Zoe's difference. She already had enough problems, with no memory.

Garet suddenly jumped to his feet. "Ivan's insane. I didn't use any Psynergy!" Then he looked down at himself. He jumped a couple of times and waved his arms around. "Hey! I can move now! Look!"

"People with regular capacity intelligence would have noticed that first," Mia said, standing as well and pulling Zoe to her feet. Together they helped Isaac up. Ivan grumbled and stood himself.

"Control," Zoe said suddenly.

"What?" Isaac asked. "Control?"

"We can control those barriers Ivan's talking about, I think. I mean, it *is* Psynergy."

"We don't know that it's Psynergy though," Garet said. "I already told you I didn't use any."

"Maybe it's an automatic reaction," Mia said, catching on. "Like…like when you hear a loud noise, you automatically jump. It happens only when you need it to happen."

"Like my Shining Strike," Ivan put in, a wide grin on his face.

"Exactly," Zoe said. "But unlike that, I think we can control this. Somehow." Before she could continue, the clearing was lit with the eerie light again, and glitter began falling from above. "I always get cut off by these things."

"It's happening again," Ivan said. "Let's see if we can stop it ourselves this time." They watched as their blue shields appeared and little glowing balls bounced off them like hail off the roof of a house.

"Zoe, yours is different," Garet commented. Zoe said nothing. She too was puzzled about this, but attributed it to not quite being able to control any of her Psynergy.

"Why don't they turn into trees?!" a voice boomed.

"I think we've found our talking buddies," Ivan mused.

"Who are they?" asked a more feminine and quieter voice. "What people are these, who are immune to Tret's glamour? Have they come to wreak more havoc in our forest?"

"What people are we," Ivan mocked. "Trees don't seem to have much sense. But maybe I'm just biased against Venus-type things."

"The boy who sends the wind is foolish and careless with his thoughts," the female voice continued, and Ivan paled. "Nothing you do will be enough to save the people of Kolima."

"These intruders have earned their fate," roared the deep voice again. "Kolima took their axes to me, and now I shall take mine to them!"

"We are dying," the female voice said wistfully. "And Kolima Forest will die with us. But the people of Kolima will die as well."

"This is true, Laurel," said the booming voice, which the Adepts guessed must belong to the one called Tret.

"Tret's once-kind heart has been torn in two as he dies. His evil side turned the people of Kolima into trees. The kind Tret is forever gone."

"The kindly heart invites destruction!" Tret hollered. "I need no kindness."

"Everyone needs kindness," Mia muttered to herself.

"Foolish girl. You will pay for that!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Mia, you're talking to trees," Isaac mumbled to her.

"So do you."

"You must reawaken Tret's kind self," Laurel said mournfully, "or we all will perish."

"Humans cannot be trusted!" boomed Tret angrily. "When I die I shall take the forest with me!" Slowly the light faded and the clearing returned to normal.

"There has to be something we can do," Zoe said. "We can't let the people of Kolima die."

"There is something we can do," Isaac said stoically. "We can head deep into the forest and, pardoning the pun, get to the root of the problem."

"Alright," the others answered. Isaac nodded and headed with very final-feeling steps into the depths of Kolima Forest.

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Vil: All done! Are you happy?

Kaede: You'd better be. This is probably the longest chapter in here. Maybe. Actually I'm not sure.

Vil: Neither am I. Now, I need somewhere close to 90 reviews before I post again! And chapter seventeen is gonna be a doozy.

Chapter 18: Chapter Seventeen: Talking to Tret Tree

Chapter 19: Chapter Eighteen: The Root of the Proble...

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Seems I forgot the questions at the end of the last chapter. In fact, I've forgotten what they *were*. Oh well. If I remember by the end of this chapter, I'll throw them in. If not, oh well.

Ack! Haven't replied to reviews in forever! Ok here goes:

Krystal-chan: I think I put it in our bio, but I'll put it here too. Norli is Venus, Kaede is Mars, Avaria is Jupiter, and I am Mercury. Feonyx, stop laughing at all this irony!

General Failure: You think Zoe is bound with all the elements, do you? An interesting idea. I *did* remember the questions this time, so answer them, please.

preslyg: No, though thanks for your guess, there is no element 'Sky.'

Jupiter Girl: THANK YOU FOR THE WONDERFUL UPDATE OF YOUR STORY! I very much enjoyed myself reading that. You have made me HYPER. Which is a good thing. And email me—you can find the email in my bio—for I've got an important thing to be telling you.

Chapter Eighteen: The Root of the Problem

By the time he hit the bottom, Isaac had stopped screaming. As he neared the floor, passing through the many levels of Tret Tree, he felt himself slowing, as though

the air itself was stopping his fall. He landed lightly on his feet and took a moment to look around.

What he saw made him cry out in amazement. A clump of thorny strangler vines held two forms tightly. Rushing to them, Isaac's eyes went wide as he saw that the forms were Zoe and Mia. The latter was staring at him with growing intensity, unable to cry out with her mouth held shut by the vines. Zoe's eyes were closed and her body was limp—Isaac couldn't even tell if she was alive.

Quickly, he reached out and called on his Venus abilities to pull away the vines. He didn't even notice Garet and Ivan come up behind him, so intent was he on freeing the girls. After a long few minutes, Mia and Zoe were free, Mia falling to her knees, Zoe to the ground, unconscious.

"Mia?" Isaac asked, and she looked up and him. Her own glowing Psynergy blinded him for a moment, and when the light faded she stood beside him again. The four of them looked down at Zoe, and Mia silently shook her head. Zoe would have to wait until their business here was finished.

Garet turned and wordlessly pointed to the opposite wall. On the wall was an identical face to the one on the outside of the tree.

"Tret," Isaac said, and the four Adepts approached the face.

"YOU!" the face roared. "You hoped to find my kindly self?"

"Well, yeah, that would have given some added benefit to the deal," Garet threw in, totally confident in his ability to defeat Venus things.

"FOOLS! You should never have come here, and now, you shall never leave!"

"I don't like the sound of that, guys," Mia mumbled, grabbing her mace and getting ready.

"Your powers protected you in the forest, but now you are in the heart of my power! Here, you will all become trees, and you'll wither with the rest of us!"

"My nightmare," Ivan said, raising the Shaman's Rod. The face of Evil Tret detached itself from the wall and dove at the Adepts, smacking into Isaac.

"Yah! You will *pay*, Tret!" Isaac yelled. "I summon the spirit of Venus, power of the Earth!" The embodiment of Venus struck Tret, but the face merely laughed and retaliated with a blast of its own.

Ivan took that moment to lunge, striking with a Ray-empowered Shaman's Rod. Tret turned its ugly visage on the boy, and let out a roar, and some kind of sparkling dust covered Ivan.

"I recognize that dust…Ivan no!" Mia yelled, as Ivan felt himself go stiff. He was about to live his nightmare, he realized. He was turning into a tree, and this time his Psynergy could not save him. Nothing could. He resigned himself to his fate as a tree within a tree and whispered a goodbye before he could no longer speak.

"Now you bear witness to the full power of Tret!" roared the head.

"Ivan!" Garet screamed, turning with angry fury on Tret. The tree laughed again and slammed into Garet, throwing him backwards. He slammed headfirst into the

opposite wall, landing near Zoe and fighting to remain conscious.

Isaac shot blasts of Venus Psynergy at Tret, knowing it wouldn't do much good but wanting to do something. Mia called on Sleet, who gave Tret a serious case of frostbite, but the tree entity seemed impervious to even these attacks.

"It's not working, Mia," Isaac said, and suddenly a vine caught his ankle. Another one wrapped around his throat and began to squeeze.

"Isaac! Hang on!" Mia cried, working frantically to free him, but nothing she did was any good. If anything, it made the vines squeeze harder the more she pulled.

The world spun around him, but Garet didn't care. He stood again and grasped the Mars fire within him, preparing to fry Tret where he stood. Or floated.

Tret! He thought, catching sight of the tree. *And... another Tret? There are two of them now? Oh well, guess I have to fry them both*! With an enraged battle cry, he let loose a Volcano, which took down both images of Tret, making them into one and doing some serious damage.

"You will pay dearly for that, fire-wielder!" Tret screamed, slamming into Garet and sending him to the ground, at which point his head knocked into yet another hard surface. Slowly and unceremoniously he stood again, though by now nothing would come into focus for more than a few seconds.

Isaac was busy fighting off the thorny strangler vines that had trapped Mia and Zoe. They were currently trying to pull off the same trick on him. The vines were evenly matched with his Venus Psynergy, though. Or they would

have been, had he not been gasping for air that he wasn't getting. He felt the darkness closing in, and wondered bleakly how many times it was possible for one person to die before it was a permanent state of residence.

"Mia…should there be two of you?" Garet asked, wobbling a bit. His head hurt, he realized, and his vision was blurring.

"No, Garet. You dented the wall, by the way. Beautiful job. Want to finish off this beast together?" In truth, Mia would have gladly given all the Psynergy she had for the others, but she knew she would need it if they even hoped to win, and for the moment she was going to have to cast aside her instinctive Mercury concern.

"Amen," Garet said, reaching for his Djinn and telling them to stand by. "Summon time?"

"Summon time," Mia agreed, a rather evil grin forming on her face. "And let's hope we're enough."

"I summon the spirit of Kirin, mythical beast of flame!" Garet yelled. The power of his two Djinn combined and opened a circular portal before him, through which rushed a fiery beast, diving on Tret. "He's nearly finished now."

"I summon the spirit of Nereid, princess of the sea spirits!" Mia cried, and she felt the rush of energy as Sleet and Fizz, combined with a good deal of her Psynergy, became the water princess and threw great waves and blasts of water at Tret, who by now knew he would be defeated.

With a final roar, he let loose flying thorns. Garet held his sword in front of his face like a shield, and Mia dove to

the ground, just barely making it under the onslaught of needlelike projectiles. When the attack stopped, Mia stood again, raising her mace high. Garet did the same with his sword.

"Ready, Mars boy?" she asked, and Garet returned her wicked grin and nodded. Together they dove at the floating head, Mia whacking it with her mace and Garet slicing it with his sword simultaneously. The moment the weapons connected, evil Tret faded and disappeared. The vines choking Isaac let go their hold and disintegrated as well, and he fell to his knees, coughing and gasping, thanking whatever spirits would listen for each breath, painful though they were.

A vine appeared in the center of the room, climbing out the hole in the ceiling. At the same time, the face of Tret reappeared again, though this one seemed to be the embodiment of kind Tret.

"What happened to me?" Tret asked. His eyes closed for a moment, then opened again. "Was I…I see…my heart was all but lost in my rage. And you defeated the evil within me?" At this, Garet and Mia nodded, and Isaac gave an assenting grunt. "I thank you. I could not leave this world with so much evil in my heart. I am free now to leave the world without regret. Goodbye, great warriors." Tret closed his eyes again.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Garet said, his face showing concern and some anger. "We can't let Tret die like this! We still need his help! I mean…look at Ivan! He's still a tree!"

"More tree than human, and that scares me," Mia said. "How can we get him, Zoe *and* Isaac out of here? That

vine holds us all, certainly, but can we carry two people and a small tree up it?"

"I can take Ivan, but not two of anyone. And I doubt you could carry Isaac or Zoe, no offense."

"…What?" Tret said suddenly, and Garet and Mia's attention snapped back to the tree. "Why have you not left me to my dying? Do you need something?"

"Yes," Isaac said hoarsely, coughing as he did so. The vines that had strangled him had done serious damage. "Kolima…the people…they are trees."

"I turned the people of Kolima into trees? I must release them before they die with the forest!"

"While you're at it, release Ivan. Uh, our treelike buddy here, that is," Garet said, motioning to the tree-thing nearby. Tret closed his eyes, the violet light made an appearance, and sparkling power began emitting from his head. Ivan's form slowly became human again, though not entirely, and the now-more-boy-than-tree adept collapsed. But Tret opened his eyes again with a grim frown.

"I can't do it…my power no longer reaches Kolima… people of Kolima…forgive me…" Tret said, and his face before them faded away.

"Tret's too weak!" Garet cried in frustration. "He doesn't have the power to save Kolima. We…we have to heal him, somehow!"

"I know, Garet," Mia said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "We cannot let the people of Kolima die with the forest. Every life in Kolima…and Ivan's life…depends on us."

"For Ivan…we have to restore Tret and save the people of Kolima! But…we still can't get out of here."

"I can make it," Isaac rasped. "Talking's a struggle, but I can get out, and probably carry someone with me. Don't look at me that way, Mia."

"Sorry, I gotta agree with Mia…well, halfway. *You* take Ivan, Isaac, and I'll take Zoe. And let's get out of this darn tree! I keep wanting to set it on fire…and the edges are going all wavy again."

"Honestly. Am I the only one who can emerge from a fight unhurt?" Mia said, standing at the base of the vine and waiting for Garet and Isaac, with their cargo, to climb it.

"Of course you are," Isaac muttered. "You can heal yourself, after all. Which, by the way, is a nice gift to share with the rest of us."

"When I have some measure of Psynergy back, sure, I'll heal you guys, if I can. For example," Mia continued, dipping into her well of Mercury Adept tricks and pulling up a common one, "I can't do anything about Ivan's condition. That is Tret's job. If in fact we can do anything to help Tret."

"Laurel thought the Hermes' Water might do it, remember?!" Isaac said suddenly as he hauled himself to the top of the vine. Garet, also arriving at the top, nodded vigorously, and Mia grinned.

The three of them climbed down the vine, depositing Ivan and Zoe gently on the ground. Garet sat down instantly, holding his head between both hands and forcing the world to come back into focus and the pounding headache to go away.

He felt a gentle hand touch his forehead, and a now-familiar soft blue light, visible even through his closed eyes, surrounded him. He felt the pain dissipate, but not leave entirely, and he realized Mia was entirely out of Psynergy now.

"Thanks," he said, blinking. "In case you were wondering, you're now a lot closer to being one, single, clearly-defined person, Mia."

"Am I?" she asked, feigning shock. "Well, it's a nice feeling to have, Garet. Sorry I can't do more than that, though."

"No, really, that was enough. It's at least bearable now." Standing again, Garet turned to face Tret, whose face was still in existence here on the outside. "Mia, have you still got that Hermes' Water?"

"Well it didn't go anywhere in the last three minutes," she said with a smile, pulling it from her bag and pouring it at the base of Tret. All around them the rich green of the forest was returning, and Tret's eyes opened again.

"I feel a great power spreading through me," Tret said, his voice strong and happy-sounding. "Hroooom…life flows within me once again."

"Tret!" Laurel cried, opening her eyes as well and looking over at them. "As you have recovered, so has our beautiful forest."

"I am sorry to have worried you so, Laurel."

"Worried *her*?!" Garet grumbled, eyes riveted on the still-part-tree Ivan and the unconscious Zoe. "How about nearly killing *us*?!"

"And you young ones," Tret went on, smiling knowingly. "Did you have a favor to ask of me?"

"Yes," Isaac reiterated. "Kolima. People who are trees. And Ivan."

"Yes Tret," Laurel said fervently. "You must turn the people of Kolima, and the companion of these children, into humans again."

"Yes, that's right!" Tret cried with sudden urgency. "I must hurry!" He closed his eyes, and there was a stronger but repeated sequence of sparkling power and purple light. Garet, Mia and Isaac watched Ivan, relieved when he returned completely to normal, despite still being unconscious. "That should do it. The people of Kolima are cursed no more."

"Tret did not always possess this horrible power," Laurel said wistfully.

"It only started when those gemstones fell from the sky," Tret put in.

"Psynergy stones?" Garet and Isaac asked together. "You really think Psynergy Stones caused all of this trouble?" Garet continued, frowning. "Little rocks?"

"I was indeed angry that people had laid waste to my forest. They had even taken their axes to me! Then those gems fell into my branches, and suddenly my fury overwhelmed me, and I was lost in anger!"

"The gem reached me when I was filled with sorrow," Laurel said. "Our actions spoke our hearts' desires, but we had no idea."

"Those gems twisted my anger into a force beyond my control," Tret said grimly. The adepts paused to consider the implications. It was a long pause indeed.

"This same thing could be happening elsewhere," Ivan's voice said, and the three whirled. He was sitting there on the ground, looking as though nothing had happened. "Don't look so surprised. I'll be alright. As soon as I get the feeling of being wood out of my head, anyway."

"You must have fought many monsters on your way here," Laurel inferred, and the adepts nodded.

"Those monsters..." Garet said, realization hitting him like he had hit the wall of Tret. "Maybe they were just animals that were...tainted. They might have been good once. And we've been killing them. And the Psynergy Stones are causing it." At this, Laurel closed her eyes and sent power forth from her mind.

"You were given powers too, Laurel?" Mia asked. "Different from Tret's, of course, but they must come from the same source. But what are you doing, Laurel?"

"What did you see, Laurel?" Tret asked when the light faded.

"It is true," Laurel said sorrowfully. "Even the animals have become monsters. And beyond the river...the river that feeds our forest...an evil force had risen up to the south of the river. Tell me, children, is that your chosen path?"

"Yes," Isaac said, his voice having gained back a measure of its former self. "We seek the Venus Lighthouse. I realize we will face much danger as time passes, and that we must hurry. But I think we finally realized how serious this is. We're a team now, more than ever before, and we can do it."

"I believe you can," Tret said, respect in his voice. "I owe you a great debt. You have saved Kolima, the forest, and me."

"Good," Garet said. "Mind telling us what you did to our other friend, there?"

"A stunning serum in the thorns of the vines. The Child of Mercury fought it with her power, but the other could not. The effect should wear off in a day or so."

"May your roots dig deep and your branches reach high, brave children," Laurel said, and the adepts nodded. Garet bent and lifted Zoe again, feeling the return of his headache coming on.

"Back to Bilibin for the third time, then?" Garet asked, and Isaac nodded. Mia pulled Ivan to his feet, and Isaac reached out to Garet with one hand and Mia with the other.

"Retreat," he whispered, and his Psynergy surrounded them all, taking them to the entrance of the forest.

"That one merits the words '*very* nice trick'," Ivan commented.

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"Jill, is this the one who saved you?" one of the guards at Bilibin Barricade was asking. The pretty young woman blushed and nodded. "Thank you for what you've done. We have a gift for you." The guard handed a rather large peanut to Isaac, who put it in his bag and smiled. "You'll find the door is open, now that the Kolima problem is solved. You'd do well to get to Bilibin before dark, though."

"We realize," Isaac said. He had already had to use a Sacred Feather, an item used to keep monsters at bay, and he had no idea how long it would be until the effects wore off. Slowly but determinedly the Adepts trudged on, confident now that they could take on anything the twilight had to throw at them. A smile was on every face, and Ivan and Garet kept looking at each other and bursting into laughter. Once again the rush of victory had taken over.

Bilibin loomed ahead of them before too long. Darkness was close at hand, and Garet found it increasingly harder to walk without zigzagging from side to side. Isaac finally gave in to the energy that was still rushing through him and ran the mile to Bilibin, leaving Garet, Ivan and Mia staring after him, each in their own unique form of perplexity. Then with a resigned sigh Ivan followed him, though at half his pace and rather stiffly.

"I cannot believe I became a tree," he muttered disgustedly as he ran. "I *still* feel like I should stop to grow roots and…photosynthesize? *Where* did *that* word come from?! I don't even *know* words that big!"

"That's one of Breeze's, actually," Gust said from his shoulder. "Breeze, having lived in a tree, had to have picked up *some* knowledge of exactly what it is they do."

"I happen to like trees, actually," Breeze stated from Ivan's head.

"Isn't that a little odd for a Jupiter Djinni?" Ivan asked.

"Ok, here's something to think about. You know how Fever likes to swim? And she's a *Mars* Djinni? Well, you've got the oddball Jupiter Djinni now. I guess there's one in every…uh…I mean…oh, you know…element?" Gust fumbled

for the right word, as 'family' had never really been a Djinn concept.

"Right. And you're saying Zap isn't odd?"

"Zap's…not entirely what he seems," Gust said, and almost on cue she and Breeze flashed out. Ivan groaned and stopped, wanting to know what Gust had meant, but finding he was already at Bilibin, and Isaac was nowhere in sight. Or Ivan didn't think so, but then he saw Isaac coming out of the Inn and giving him a wave.

"Come on! I got us rooms for the night! And for those of us who are awake enough, dinner's on the house!"

"Dinner!" Garet said, coming up behind them. "With the way I see things, I'll be eating twice the food! That would be…" Garet trailed off slowly, glancing to the side without turning his head at first. Then he slowly turned, staring downward with a look of pure fear on his face.

Standing behind him, arms folded, and a glare to rival that of Tret himself on her face, was Mia. She delicately raised one eyebrow, and Garet began to visibly shake. She cleared her throat, and Garet slumped, shaking his head.

"Alright, alright, geez, I'll listen to you. I'll skip dinner for sleep—*this* time. By Mars, you Mercury Adepts are pushy! Not to mention terrifying!"

"Only terrifying when we need to be, Garet," Mia said sweetly, though the frozen glare was still fixed on her face.

"Ice queen, that one," Garet said. "And would you rather I leave Zoe out here with you, or just set her at an empty table somewhere?" Mia gave him a frosted look again, and he shuddered and kept walking, passing Isaac and

heading into the Inn. Isaac chuckled softly, as did Ivan and Mia.

"Did that take practice, or is it an inherited trait?" Isaac asked Mia as they too went into the Inn and sat at a table.

"Oh, I don't know, really. I mean…when you've had to deal with what I've had to deal with…you kind of require a rather potent glare or something along those lines. That's the first time I've gotten the point across without speaking, though. Not to mention it was fun. Listen, Isaac, I've been thinking," Mia continued, and Isaac paused, fork halfway to his mouth. "About what Tret and Laurel were saying about the Psynergy Stones, and how everything was turning…evil as a result. We've been fighting and killing innocent creatures all this time, Isaac, and it wasn't even their fault!"

"Don't go all sentimental on us now," Ivan said, though his own eyes held their measure of sadness. "We have always been attacked first, remember. It's not like we hunted any of these things down for the fun of it. We acted in self defense, and by all means I aim to defend whatever self I have at the time."

"The only enemy I think we *have* hunted down is Saturos, and even then, he started the fight, not us. Though you might have told us about that staring thing earlier. With the way I've seen it work, we probably could have had Saturos on his knees if you took a step forward!" Isaac laughed, and the image this presented in their minds was indeed very humorous.

"Food!" Flint cried suddenly, appearing in a golden flash right in the middle of Isaac's plate. "Oh yeah! This stuff looks *good*!"

"Do we need to have this conversation *again*? Djinn don't eat."

"I'd like to try. I've never seen such good food!"

"Oh, no. I don't want to know the effects of eating food on a Djinni. Now get off my plate!" Flint made an annoyed sound but did so, disappearing in a golden flash, much the way he had shown up. Isaac shook his head and sighed, laughing along with Mia and Ivan, and then returning to his food.

A short while later, all three of them stood. Mia and Ivan turned and headed for the stairs. "Aren't you coming, Isaac?" Mia asked, looking back over her shoulder at him. "Unless you'd rather sleep down here on the floor or something. Though I can't imagine it would be very comfortable."

"I'll be up shortly," Isaac said stoically, and Mia nodded and headed up the rest of the stairs. Isaac waited for a long moment, then quietly went out the door and stepped into the cold night. Winter was fast approaching, if not already there, and he felt the chill even through his shirt and tunic. The slight breeze made his yellow scarf fly out behind him, and for a moment he smiled. This was the way things *should* be, he decided.

The sky was clear, the stars bright pinpoints of light against the black expanse. Isaac felt his eyes drawn to it, and remembered how he used to sneak out onto the roof at night sometimes in Vale, just to watch the stars and think. *Vale*, he thought. *My home. If I don't succeed…if I can't stop Saturos and Menardi from lighting every Lighthouse, Vale will be destroyed. Along with everyone in it. My mom, Garet's family, Jenna's grandparents…all of them gone. And*

everywhere I've been…everyone I've met…destroyed because of evil. Isaac sighed audibly and stared into the starry sky.

We're the only thing standing between Angara and total annihilation.

The thought nearly threw Isaac off his feet. Could they really do this, he wondered. Could they really save an entire world, all alone? As the thought hit him, determination set itself on his face.

We will not fail. We will do this, and we'll do it together!

"Watch your backs, Saturos and Menardi. You have the Elemental Stars, and we want them. And, whatever the cost, we'll get them!" he yelled to the night. It was getting colder, though, and he was suddenly very tired. He sighed contentedly and went back inside and up to his waiting bed.

Far away, in the middle of a very hot stretch of sand, two people heard words on the wind. And the words made them shudder.

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Vil: The end. Wow. That got serious there. I've been rereading some of my older chapters, and I think they get better as I go along. Which brings me to the questions:

1) Should I take this story all the way through Golden Sun 1, or break off about halfway and start a new one (something along the lines of "As Luck Would Have It Continued") so that there doesn't end up being an overwhelming number of chapters?

2) Anyone have any guesses as to what Zoe's element is? There's at least one clue per chapter, even this one.

3) Who out there wants a Christmas fic about the Adepts, courtesy of the Company?

Which reminds me, this chapter is dedicated to Feonyx and Lea, who not only know Zoe's element (and hopefully will keep their mouths shut about it) but whom I consider very good friends and rather…interesting muse-type people.

And I need 112 reviews (I have passed 100! Hallelujah!) for chapter nineteen. There may be a bigger gap between 18 and 19 than there was between 17 and 18 because of school and stuff that usually happens during the week. And Thanksgiving.

That's all for now. And follow the magic arrow!! ~Vil

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Chapter 20: Chapter Nineteen: Bad Day

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: my apologies for the long wait. ALATC delayed things a bit. But here it is for you!! Chapter nineteen of ALWHI! Twenty to follow soon!

Chapter Nineteen: Bad Day

"Morning already?" Ivan groaned as Isaac shook him awake. "Somehow I can tell this is going to be a bad day."

"Oh, come on now. We just solved all of Bilibin's and Kolima's problems. How can that be bad?" Isaac asked with a grin.

"What are you, crazy? Wait, don't answer that. We were *forbidden* by 'lord' McCoy to have anything to *do* with Kolima Forest, remember?"

"They can see past that, I'm sure. Get up, get ready, we've got some people to see." Ivan groaned as Isaac left the room. Enough coins for separate rooms had come from the Evil Tret battle, and Ivan almost wishes he'd been human enough to see it. Garet and Mia had filled him in a bit on the walk back, but neither of them had really been in a talking mood.

Ivan joined the others (Zoe included) as the last for breakfast. He recounted for them some of the finer points of being a tree, which were not fine at all from his point of view, and Zoe sighed.

"It makes me wish I was…coherent at the time. I could have helped," she said wistfully.

"It wasn't fate's way," Ivan said cryptically, and they all looked at him.

"Let's just get this over with," Garet said, and there was a simultaneous nod. Together the five rose and headed for McCoy's makeshift palace.

"We've been looking everywhere for you!" said one of the guards as they approached the entrance.

"You *have*?" Mia asked incredulously.

"The curse of the holy tree…you're the ones who broke it, right?" asked the other guard.

"Well…yeah…" Isaac said falteringly. "I mean, yes, we are." Both guards smiled and nodded.

So the adepts were taken by total surprise when both guards yelled, "You're under arrest!" The five were grabbed roughly, hands held behind their backs, and escorted silently to McCoy's chamber.

"We've brought the warriors, milord," said the front guard, shoving Isaac in.

"Ungrateful slimy slithering wet…" Garet grumbled as he too was thrown into the room, Ivan, Mia and Zoe behind him.

"So, yeh're the wee—I mean, brave—lads I met before!" McCoy said rather cheerfully. Mia's eyebrows shot up.

"*Lads*?" she whispered furiously. Zoe put a hand on her shoulder and shook her head.

"What were yer names, again?" McCoy asked, scratching his head and reminding the adepts of a confused ape.

"I'm Isaac," Isaac said, giving a forced grin, "tall and redheaded is Garet, short and blond is Ivan, blue and… glaring…is Mia, and purple and perplexed in the back there is Zoe. Now what do you want?"

"Isaac and company…" McCoy began, earning another icy stare from Mia. "And did I not decline yer offer when we first met?"

"Bad day, Isaac, like I said," Ivan muttered.

"You did. Did that matter?" Isaac asked McCoy, who went red.

"I did nae give it enough consideration back then," he admitted, and Mia smiled in a satisfied way. "And yet yeh went oan tae break the curse despite my words, did yeh not?"

"Correct again."

"I humbly thank you," McCoy said, with as much a bow as such a big man could give. "I was worried yeh might nae stop here on your way back."

"Oh, no, we *wanted* to be arrested," Ivan muttered.

"You just *have* to keep rubbing my face in it, don't you?" Isaac asked, and Ivan nodded. "That was rhetorical."

"I know."

"I want tae show my appreciation for yer help…" McCoy went on.

"Long-winded, isn't he?" Garet remarked, and Mia and Zoe giggled.

"I relied oan my money, but I forgot about m people's needs. Yeh reminded me of my duties. As lord of these lands, I will do my best for everyone's behalf. Isaac, it would honor me greatly if yeh'd accept a wee token of my gratitude."

"Depends on your offer," Isaac said with Venus-like calm.

"Yeh can choose yerself, from my personal treasury! Choose somethin' that'll help yeh along yer way. Many thanks tae yeh, and tae yer companions as well." Mia smiled her satisfied grin again, and they turned to follow the guard to the treasury. "Yeh lads did well."

"*Lads*?" Mia asked again, louder this time, and whirled around, ice blue eyes fixed on McCoy. "*LADS??"*

"Surely I'm not believin' the *lasses* defeated the holy tree!" McCoy said, and he and the guards shared a hearty laugh. "An absurd idea!"

"For your information," Garet said hotly, "Mia is the reason we made it out of Kolima Forest alive and in one piece. Pardon, Ivan…five separate single pieces."

"Surely yeh're makin' up such a tale! This one here looks too weak to swing that staff she carries! And that one, in the back there…how can yeh be tellin' me she uses that sword?"

"I'll have you know, 'Lord' McCoy," Mia said sarcastically, storming up to him, "Zoe and I uphold our end just as easily as the boys do. And if you can't believe that," she said, raising her hand, "maybe *this* will change your mind!" She shrieked, anger flowing through her worse than it ever had, and slapped McCoy across the face with all her strength.

McCoy began to laugh. "A weak lass. I felt it not," he said, though his expression clearly showed otherwise. His face turned into a puzzled one as he found himself unable to move. Isaac made a mental note to ask Mia about it later.

"Strong words from a man who is slave to his woman," Isaac muttered darkly.

"A woman who's weaker and dumber than Mia, at that," Zoe added angrily. Mia turned to them, meeting four gazes of complete approval. Whirling to face McCoy again, she raised her hand and this time did not scream, grinning evilly as she saw McCoy flinch.

"Afraid? You should be," Mia said, her voice dripping venom as she lowered her hand *very* slowly. "Learn manners and respect, and I'll reconsider my judgment of you. Now, sir guard, please lead us to the treasury?"

The guard easily obliged, leading them quickly down a flight of stairs and to a room with four treasure chests inside, instructing Isaac to choose one.

"The one on the far right," Ivan muttered, "holds the best prize." Isaac gave him a disbelieving look, and Ivan tapped his forehead. Isaac shrugged and opened the rightmost chest, pulling out a Water of Life.

"Zoe, your Water of Life didn't sparkle gold like that…" Garet muttered, and she shrugged. Like she knew. Since the last memory, she had yet to come up with another one, though she had run out of paper with the way she had been drawing lately.

As they left the palace, they ran into McCoy's wife, who Zoe thought looked eerily similar to her. Ivan, picking up on those thoughts, whispered, "You've got a much nicer demeanor, Zo'."

After enduring her enraged ranting about McCoy's inability to do even the slightest task, Isaac raised a hand to silence her.

"That's all well and good, ma'am. Now, could you give us directions to Kolima Village?"

"East of here," she said venomously, then turned and stalked off. Mia, after a long moment, suggested that they go to Kolima sooner rather then later.

"The residents there might be a bit…friendlier," she said, and the others easily agreed.

"It's a long walk," Garet put in. "But when has that mattered?" he added dryly as they walked full out from the castle to the gates, and out the gates with a sharp left turn. They kept walking fast for a while, and by the time they stopped, they had reached the barricade, and the energy for talk seemed beyond them.

The energy for battle obviously stood untouched, though, as a horde of Zombies, Rats, and Rat Soldiers assailed them as they walked to Kolima. Even with the delay, they were in the village before two in the afternoon, and

even time-conscious Isaac thought that would have been impossible.

"Ivan, how much Psynergy have you got left?" Isaac asked quietly.

"Considering it's the only thing I usually use, not much. You have something in mind?"

"Did you know that was a pun? Anyway, I was wondering if you minded…oh, what, this is pun day now…if you minded reading these people's minds and seeing if they're as angry as McCoy."

Ivan closed his eyes for a moment and Psynergy flared. Then he opened them again and grinned. "They all just are happy they are no longer trees. Likely they don't know it's our fault."

"Speaking of fault," Garet said, and the others looked at him. "Mia, what *was* that you did back there?"

"I don't know, really. I think it was some…strange combination of Psynergy loss, sleep loss, and me hating McCoy with everything I have. And, you know, I was half of the reason we made it out of there."

"Only half?" Garet asked incredulously. "Mia, you are pretty much the *entire* reason we got out of there! Don't let it get to your head or anything," he added hastily.

"I have strong doubt that things get to her DJINNI!" Ivan yelped, jumping into the air. Several people stopped and stared at him, then shrugged and went about their activities.

"You doubt that things get to my Djinni? Which one?" Mia asked. Ivan shook his head and pointed, the biggest grin in the world on his face. "Oh. A Venus Djinni. So?"

"SO?!" Isaac cried, practically jumping himself at the idea of another Venus Djinni. "It's mine, it's *mine*! I mean," he said, regaining a measure of his composure, "since it matches my element and all."

"Right. How do we get inside the fence that's surrounding the thing?" Garet asked.

"This ladder might help," Zoe said, crouching in the shadows of one of the tree-trunk buildings. "It looks like it leads to some kind of basement. Come on! Let's go down!"

Slowly they climbed the rickety and rotted-looking ladder. It did indeed lead to a basement of sorts, though it felt more like a damp cave. Mia, the last one down, made a disgusted noise as she wiped the grime from her hands on the back of Garet's cloak. Garet cried out in protest, and Mia only grinned.

"Be quiet!" Isaac hissed. "We don't know what's down here."

"It's under a village, for Jupiter's sake," Ivan said. "What could possibly go wrong?" As though Ivan had given it a cue, what looked like a discarded pile of kitchen utensils flew at him from the shadows and pinned him to the wall.

"Bad day, Ivan?" Isaac asked sarcastically. Ivan groaned in what Isaac imagined was a kind of Jupiter-Adept curse. The pile of bones, for that's what it was, pieces of a Skeleton, fell from Ivan and reformed themselves into the Skeleton.

Ivan, free of the bones pinning him to the wall, fell to the ground. Isaac, Garet and Zoe found themselves occupied with the other Skeleton and the Ghost that had followed the first one, while the original Skeleton stood before Ivan and Mia.

"*Very* bad day, Isaac," Ivan replied casually, firing a Plasma at the Skeleton as he stood with the help of the Shaman's Rod.

"I thought you were out of Psynergy!" Garet accused as he ducked a wild swing of Isaac's sword. "Hey, Isaac! Fight the enemy, not me!"

"If I could *hit* the Ghost I wouldn't come so close to your head! Tell it to be more substantial!" Isaac shot back as he tried to hit the Ghost again.

"You do realize that by all logical—" Ivan began.

"Screw logic," Isaac said, cutting him off as he threw his sword into the air. "Squire's Ragnarok!" The sword became limned with golden light, slowly transforming itself into a giant blade of pure Venus Psynergy.

Obviously, the Ghost was not as impervious to a Psynergy sword as it was to a metal one, because it disintegrated within seconds of impact. Isaac grinned smugly, then turned to Zoe and Garet, who had been fighting the other Skeleton, only to find it reduced to a quickly-fading pile of bones.

Isaac turned to watch as Mia finished off the other Skeleton with a Frost. Ivan grinned and gave Isaac a little wave, rolling his eyes as he did so. "Before you ask, I warn you not to. Oh, and Garet, Psynergy *does* come back over time."

"Let's just get this over with before something *else* finds us," Garet grumbled. "And Ivan, you do know you brought that on us, right?"

"How, might I ask, was it *my* fault?"

"Asking what could go wrong. Questions like that always bring trouble. And you were the one who said today would be a bad day, too. What are you, prophetic?"

"Just lucky, I guess," Ivan said as they climbed another ladder that was within jumping distance (provided they could jump across some nasty-looking water) of the ladder they'd just come down.

Isaac, who had begun climbing first, fought hard to contain his excitement at the prospect of a second Djinni, tying him with everyone else. *Finally, Garet can stop gloating*, he thought. Emerging, he called in his mind for Flint, who appeared on his head with barely a show of light.

"Get *off* there! Honestly, I hope all you Venus Djinn aren't so transfixed with my head!" Flint only giggled in response as Isaac hauled himself into the fenced area and looked at the Djinni before him.

"Hello there Granite!" Flint called, and the Djinni whirled.

"Flint! Long time no see! You've got a human with you!" the Djinni, Granite, replied. "What in the world?"

"Before you answer, Flint," Isaac said, "convince Granite here to join up and let's get on with it."

"I didn't know you were so impatient," Garet said from behind.

"Anything to stop the four of you from goading me about my lack of Summoning prowess."

"Since when have we done that?" Mia asked.

"Garet and Ivan do. Anyway…Granite, you interested in a quest to save the world?"

"Does it involve heights?" the Djinni asked, and Ivan and Flint shared wary looks. "Because if it does, count me *out*." Isaac breathed a sigh of relief at this.

"Not really. I don't plan to be climbing any more trees, at any rate. Want to come along?"

"Sure, why not?" Granite asked rhetorically, dissolving into golden shafts of light. Isaac felt a third mind join the combination of he and Flint. Granite appeared again in a flash of light, with a more greenish tint to it than Flint's.

"I have a claim on riding on Isaac's head," Flint said haughtily.

"*Flint*! You have no such claim! Granite, please, what do you do?"

"What, you mean my Djinni ability? Defense."

"Thank you," Isaac said. "Flint, get off my head." The Djinni grudgingly obliged, flashing out mere seconds before Granite. "Now…back down the ladder?"

"Not *again*," Ivan moaned. "I like caves less than I like trees."

"A lot of dislike in there," Garet put in.

"We could just go over the fence," Zoe suggested, and the other four Adepts turned to look at her. "What?"

"Could you have mentioned that *before* we had to go down that ladder?" Garet asked harshly. Zoe shrugged.

"It didn't occur to me. But it's only about two feet high. Makes me wonder why Granite never left it."

"Beats me. Venus is an odd element," Ivan said, vaulting the fence in one graceful leap. "There are some advantages to being light," he added reflectively.

"Or light in the head, in your case," Garet added, landing roughly beside Ivan, who glared at him.

"Really Garet? I thought you were talking about yourself," Mia put in, as she, Zoe and Isaac joined them on the outside side of the fence.

"Very funny."

"I thought it was."

"Have we had this conversation before?"

****

Early the next morning, after a refreshing (and quiet) stay in Kolima's Inn, which was a tree trunk converted into a building (a fact that made Isaac exuberant and Ivan nervous), the Adepts left Kolima.

"Where are we headed now?" Garet asked, looking at the map.

"We've got to get to Venus Lighthouse. This map says it's down by…a place called 'Laviero'?" Zoe questioned, not

sure if she was reading the map correctly.

"Lalivero," Mia corrected, reading over Garet's other shoulder. "Warmer than Imil, definitely. Looks like it's by a desert, even."

"Sulhalla Desert," Garet said, pointing to it with his free hand. "Hey, wait a minute…Zoe, how did you know we have to go to Venus Lighthouse?"

"It's the only other lighthouse on your map besides Mercury, Garet," Zoe pointed out.

"Heads up!" Isaac called back to them. He and Ivan had been in front. "We've got company." Two Rat Soldiers, a Will Head, and a Zombie blocked the path ahead of them.

"Couldn't we just go around?" Ivan complained. After his little tangle with the Skeleton the day before, he hadn't exactly felt up to another fight. He wasn't about to complain, of course.

"Go around where?" Mia asked, gesturing to the landscape. A high cliff was on one side, a sheer drop to the water below. On the other side were tall mountains.

"A thing of endless water at the end of the world…" Isaac said reflectively, thinking of when Kraden had told him those words.

"We're surrounded!" Zoe cried suddenly. The others whirled to find two Skeletons, a handful of Oozes and several Rats approaching from behind. "How do we take them all down?"

"Concentrate on one at a time. When that one goes, head for the next. Don't do anything stupid," Isaac

cautioned. He drew his sword and looked at the others, each readying their own weapons.

"I thought Oozes were an Imil thing," Ivan commented dryly as he batted first one, then another, then the other two away with the Shaman's Rod. The spikes on the things' heads were sharp, and if they kept up what they were doing the Shaman's Rod might break.

Isaac had gone for the Rat Soldiers, thinking himself fast enough and skilled enough with a sword to fight them both off at once. He was hit with glancing blows several times, minor hits that didn't even faze him. Soon one Rat Soldier was gone, and the other one quickly followed after a blast of Spire Psynergy.

Mia had switched to a different tactic, covering the business end of her Witch's Wand with spiked ice, and was slamming it into the Rats that assailed her with all she was worth. Eventually they began to diminish, but the more she killed the more seemed to appear. One of them jumped onto her back and scratched sharp claws along the side of her face and neck. Another bit hard into her side, causing one hand to drop the Wand as she doubled over.

Zoe had the Will Head pretty much under control, she thought, raising a hand to use Storm and finish it. It retaliated, however, with its Mystic Fire, burning Zoe and causing her to stumble back, sword held defensively in front of her. The Will Head jumped, impaling itself on the blade and disintegrating. Seeing the disadvantage Mia was at, Zoe turned to aid the Mercury Adept.

Garet found himself fending off the Skeletons. A couple rounds of Volcano had them looking quite crispy, but one of them managed to crack Garet on the head with a

bony arm. He yelped and jumped back, glaring at the two Skeletons that had suddenly become four.

"I summon the spirit of Kirin, mythical beast of flame!" Garet called, and Kirin rode in through its circle of fire and finished the Skeletons. Garet instantly turned to help Ivan and got a *second* head-smacking from the Shaman's Rod as it batted another Ooze. Only two were left now. The blow left Garet on his knees.

"Garet!" Ivan yelped, taking down the Oozes with Plasma, barely giving it a thought. "By the god of thunder… Garet, I'm so sorry!"

Isaac heard this, and turned to see Ivan kneeling on the ground beside Garet, and Zoe and Mia finishing the last of the Rats. Isaac hurried over, looking curiously at Ivan.

"We've never fought so many enemies before," Ivan mused. "It's almost as though a trap of some sort has been set." Again as though on cue, nearly a dozen tall, menacing figures began to charge from the mountains.

"What are they?" Zoe asked, fear edging into her voice as she and Mia finished.

"Lizard Men," Mia said, her voice hard.

"I swear…that boy is prophetic," Garet said, pulling himself to his feat unsteadily. "Bad days all around."

The five Adepts formed a waiting line as the Lizard Men charged.

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Vil: end chapter nineteen! CLIFFHANGER! Review with an actual comment for more!

Chapter 21: Chapter Twenty: Charge

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: First of all, see the note about Restore and Restore at the end of the chapter. Now, on to answers and such:

Jupiter Girl: The Ivan-prophetic thing was supposed to be an ironic joke.

Griffinkhan: Who *doesn't* agree about the fence?

General Failure: McCoy was NOT frozen. Just socked, a little.

Everyone else said basically the same things…so, ON TO THE STORY! At long last!

Chapter 20: Charge

"Let's make this a bad day for them and not us, then," Isaac said determinedly. The Lizard Men drew closer with every second, and the five Adepts looked at each other wearily, wondering if Ivan's words were true. If this was indeed a trap, why was it here, and who had set it? Had it been set for them, or just any traveler on their way south?

"Save those thoughts," Ivan told himself. The Shaman's Rod came up as the first three Lizard Men leapt into an attack. In seconds everything became a flurry of activity as the Adepts fought for their lives.

Garet found himself split off from the others, surrounded by three of the things, each about one and a half times his size. "Forge! Fever! Get out here!"

"Aye captain!" Fever squealed excitedly. "Let's burn 'em down!"

"I'm not a captain."

"Is it at all possible to negotiate with you big fellas?" Forge asked, directing his query at the Lizard Men. The nearest one only growled and swiped out at Forge, connecting with Garet's shoulder instead and sending him into a full spin. His whirling motion gave him an idea, and as Forge gave a resigned, "I guess not," Garet raised a hand and grinned sardonically.

"Guard's Heat Wave!" he yelled, and the waves of fiery energy radiated in the circles he made as he spun, throwing all three Lizard Men for enough off balance for him to attack one. Ignoring his dizziness and aching head and shoulder, he jumped at one, getting in a few good hits before he was facing all three again.

The other seven seemed to move much faster to Zoe, Isaac, Mia and Ivan, who were all defending at once against the onslaught of attacks. They were already weak when this fight began, and now it was beginning to look hopeless. Psynergy flared in bright flashes followed by water, wind or raining stones. Ivan cast Plasma more times than he could stand, and one of the Lizard Men *did* fall. As it disintegrated, the one behind it kicked out, sending Ivan sprawling backwards, dazed.

"I didn't think Lizard Men were capable of complex attack formations," Mia commented as she cast Tundra, freezing one to the spot before she bashed it with the Witch's Wand, retrieved from the ground where it had been dropped. The movement made pain flare in her face and side, but she ignored it, focusing on the enemy first.

"That's the problem," Isaac said, using Ragnarok to bring down a second, needing to lean on his sword to remain standing. "They aren't. That's why I'm wondering if Ivan was onto something. It may very well be a trap. But set by whom?"

"Logical answer—Saturos and Menardi," Zoe offered, ducking under the swing of a clawlike hand.

"I thought we said 'screw logic'," Ivan groaned as he rejoined the battle. He caught sight of Garet, on his knees and at the mercy of three of the Lizard Men. "You guys can handle these?" he asked, diving and rolling to Garet's aid. The other three would have stopped and stared had they not had more pressing matters to attend to.

The next few moments passed rapidly, two more Lizard Men falling, but the damage done to the Adepts enough to give the remaining Lizard Men the advantage.

Zoe found herself trapped in the same ring as Ivan and Garet, the latter of whom was unconscious on the ground. Ivan and Zoe weren't doing all that great either, ringed by four Lizard Men, the other two being taken down by Isaac and Mia, though they couldn't see it.

"Ivan…how fast…can you run?" Zoe asked, breathing hard, sword long ago fallen to the ground. The Lizard Men knew they were weak. They were taunting the Adepts, striking and pulling back in ways that had been thought beyond their limited thought capacity.

"Why? Got a plan?" Ivan asked.

"Not one that…lets everyone…survive," Zoe said dejectedly. It was hopeless. Her thoughts brightened a split

second later as she felt energy building within her. She was starting to like the feeling. "Ivan, duck."

"What?" Ivan asked as the air around them began to heat up. "Oh no. Hit the deck," he moaned, kneeling beside Garet to watch.

"Explorer's Charge!" Zoe yelled, and from her outstretched hand exploded a ball of flaming energy. It wiped out the two Lizard Men in front of her, and nearly took down Isaac as well, as he made his way over to help them.

He caught Zoe as she collapsed, and Mia hurried to join them. She, Isaac and Ivan looked up at the two Lizard Men left, the largest and strongest of the group. They looked at each other, sharing the same thought. There wasn't enough power left to take down these creatures, not even one.

A shadow blocked the sun, and for a moment they feared another enemy, but when they looked up there was nothing to be seen.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash, a yell, and a sudden chill in the air. The remaining Lizard Men, to the shock of all the Adepts, were frozen solid, fading shortly after.

"Coins," Mia muttered, picking up something from the ground. "A bag of coins. We aren't the first."

Isaac nodded grimly in agreement. Ivan and Zoe, though thinking the idea was an unpleasant one, were preoccupied with the figure retreating into the shadows.

Bilibin, Zoe thought, hoping Ivan would pick up on it. He did, and nodded, and this time their thoughts were the

same. *Who is he, and why does he follow us*?

"We can't make it," Mia said suddenly, and all eyes capable focused on her. She was kneeling on the side of Garet opposite Ivan and shaking her head slowly.

"Elaborate?" Ivan asked, a worried look on his face.

"I don't have enough Psynergy to heal all of us, and I doubt Isaac does either."

"Or Zoe," Isaac added. "I think she's used up. Wait," he said suddenly, getting an idea. "Where's the next place we have to go?"

"A place called Fuchin Temple," Ivan said, studying the map wearily.

"Do we have enough Psynergy to get one of us there?"

"Probably," Mia speculated. "That would leave the rest of us in a bad position, though."

"Could you handle it?"

"Isaac, exactly what are you planning?"

"Send one of us to Fuchin Temple for help," Isaac said. He sighed as Ivan and Mia gave him incredulous stares. "Any better plans?"

"No, but I don't like the one we have," Mia said, a concerned look on her face. "Who would go? And it's obviously not safe enough for anyone to travel alone."

"Send Zoe and me," Ivan said, and Zoe glared at him. *You volunteered me*! She thought angrily, and Ivan picked

up on it, barely hiding a smirk. "We're the least…tired, and the least injured. And the only ones who wouldn't be much help right now," he added as Mia started to protest.

"Mia, look at yourself," Zoe said, placing a hand on her shoulder and wincing as her ears rang from Mia's shriek. "You obviously can't go, and Garet can't, and I have the strong assumption that Isaac would stay behind no matter who else is."

"Never assume," Ivan began, but when no one moved to cut him off, he sighed heavily. "It's not the same without Garet."

"Nor will it ever be, if you two don't hurry," Isaac said, meeting Ivan's eyes steadily and hoping he got the meaning behind the words.

"Right, right, were going," Zoe said, looking at them concernedly for just a moment. "Come on, Iv'. Maybe you can talk some sense into Zap along the way. Make him stop twittering nonsense at me all the time."

"All Jupiter Djinn do *that*," Ivan said exasperatedly, obviously thinking of Breeze and Gust. They went on talking, taking their minds off the recent events, leaving Isaac and Mia staring after them.

"What are *we* going to do, is the question," Mia said, a pensive look on her face.

"I think it's obvious," Isaac said with a long, drawn sigh and a glance at Garet. "Let's just hope to Sol that we've got the Psynergy to do it."

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It was long into the night before Ivan and Zoe stopped for a break. Both were tired and sore, but neither wanted to risk taking any longer than they had to. A guard had let down a bridge for them about an hour ago, and to their great relief there were lights in sight in the distance.

"Fuchin Temple…I hope," Ivan said with a long, relieved sigh. "And I hope they've got someone who can help us."

"Why didn't we think of using our Djinn?" Zoe asked suddenly. Ivan glanced at her with an amazingly humorous expression of curiosity, but Zoe managed to hold back her laughter. "Mia's got…what's-his-name…Fizz, right? Fizz could have helped."

"We didn't Summon anything, either," Ivan remarked, his mind floating back to thoughts of trap and enemies. "Was there something wrong with our minds?"

"If there was, it was already there when the battle started," remarked a dry voice, and Zoe groaned.

"Go *away*, Zap," she said annoyedly. "Or at least keep quiet when you aren't visible. Must you have some comment for *everything*?"

"Perhaps."

"I see why you Jupiter Adepts are so crazy," Zoe remarked to Ivan, who hid a smile.

"Come on," he said, standing and stretching. "We've got friends waiting for us out there." Zoe stood as well, and was, quite frankly, considering the benefits of a staff weapon over a blade. Ivan, picking up on this, grinned smugly as he

leaned on his Shaman's Rod. "Jupiter Adepts are crazy, huh?"

"Crazier than…than…whatever it is I am," Zoe said, the thought occurring to her that she didn't know exactly *what* kind of Adept she was. *Just another side-effect of my new and totally weird lifestyle*, she thought. The fact that she had identified her travels as new and weird would not register until much later.

For Ivan, however, the words hit home immediately. He sighed and wondered if his constant thought-reading state was do to an extreme lack of energy or control. The other half of his mind (and consequently the more awake half) was trying *not* to think of how or what Isaac, Garet and Mia were doing.

The lights grew larger, brighter, and considerably more welcoming as they got closer. The sight of two children stumbling about in the dark no doubt evoked surprise in the few residents of the temple outside this late. Nevertheless, two of them intercepted Zoe and Ivan just before the sound of the waterfall became unbearable.

"Children are doing what here at this hour? From Xian, are you?" asked one. Zoe shook her head to clear it and try to decipher this odd backwards way of speaking.

"We need help," she said finally. "Our friends are out there…there was a battle…we all couldn't make it here." Zoe shrugged helplessly, not knowing what else there was to say. Before the man could reply, an older-looking man with a distinguished air about him pushed past.

"Thank Jupiter," Ivan muttered, then gave the elderly man a friendly smile. "Hello. Care to help us?"

"I would very much like to," he answered in a wise voice. Zoe looked from Ivan, back to the man, and back to Ivan. Neither of them noticed this however. "You see, I am traveling around the world to spread good will. But can the two of you make it back so far?"

"We sure as ever can try," Ivan said determinedly. The second man, having not spoken yet, laughed quietly and produced a sparkling violet stone from a pocket.

"Use this," he said, holding it out to Ivan, who took it. Instantly there was a flash, and the Psynergy Stone disappeared. Zoe and Ivan suddenly felt much better, with their Psynergy fully energized, and Zoe wasted minuscule time with her Restore Psynergy.

"Now Ivan," she said as she, Ivan and the three men headed away from the temple, with the two younger ones riding horses that pulled a cart in which the old man rode.

"I want a ride," Ivan threw out. "What Zoe?"

"Who *is* that man?"

"A Great Healer. There are tons of them…well, enough so that one or one of their younger counterparts resides in pretty much every city I've been to. Except, of course, for Imil, now. Mia came with us."

"Geez. What a wonderful piece of information. Why am I never told until matters reach the desperate level?"

"You never ask," Ivan said simply, in the typical Jupiter Adept reply, and in fact the exact words Zap was saying in Zoe's mind.

They were moving along at a relatively fast pace, and relief grew more and more prominent in the Adepts' minds. Of course, that only lasted until the newest shadowy form leapt from a thick grove of trees.

****

"Mia," Isaac asked for what seemed like the thousandth time, "how—"

"An hour, at most," she said, intercepting the question with a half-answer, half-sigh. "That's all. None of us can last any longer than that."

"Not good odds."

"They never have been before. I see no need for change."

"We've got to trust Ivan and Zoe then. What about Garet?"

"Isaac…I almost don't want to tell you," Mia said regretfully. "He's your best friend, and you're in no position to be worrying."

"No more than you are."

"It goes against my code, Isaac. I'm sorry."

"Code?" Isaac asked incredulously. He would have shifted position so he might see Mia's face, but the very idea of shifting made him see stars.

"My own personal code. I'm not telling, Isaac, and that's final. I'll tell you after Zoe and Ivan return with help.

Unless you drive yourself mad with thinking about it beforehand," Mia added, a smile in her voice.

"That bad, huh?"

"I keep forgetting that you're half healer too."

"Only half?"

"Does it matter?"

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Zoe and Ivan stood before the others, weapons in hand. Only when the figure raised its hands in a gesture of peace did Ivan set the end of his Rod down and Zoe drop the point of her sword to the dirt.

"I'm here as a friend," said a voice. The voice carried an unfamiliar, soft accent, though its tone was definitely one of tranquility.

"Who are you?" Zoe asked. She was confident she knew this man, for he was a man, and a tall one. He wore a hooded cloak wrapped tightly about him, and his face was hidden beneath the shadows of its hood, even though he stood in the ring of light from one of the horse rider's lanterns.

"A friend," he repeated, an obvious grin in the tone. "I wanted to congratulate you, mostly, Ivan and Zoe," he continued.

"What do you mean?" Ivan asked. He couldn't even read this one's mind, though he certainly was trying. Ivan never got his answer, though, for the man was gone, silently and almost unnoticeably back into the trees.

"I'm starting to think the Elements conspire against my curious mind," Ivan muttered, wasting no time in continuing to walk on. He knew they had no time, almost literally, and he wasn't about to waste any more of it.

"Likely they do," Zoe said. "Look! There's a light ahead!" she cried, pointing.

"A fire?" asked the Great Healer. One of the men nodded.

"It's them. It has to be," Ivan whispered.

"We'd better hope so," Zoe agreed.

****

Restore and Restore. Mia has a Restore Psynergy that cures some sort of status ailment. Zoe has a Restore Psynergy that acts almost like Ply. Deal with it. Sorry for the confusion—when I wrote Zoe's Restore in, I had no idea there really WAS one already.

A cliffhanger of sorts. Hope you guys out there are still interested. Review please!! No minimum this time, because I don't know when I can have the next chapter done. I'll try to hurry.
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Chapter 22: Chapter TwentyOne: Bitten by Mutant Lugg...

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Finally, finally, it's here! I had to get my game people back to the temple to do it, but it's here! Enjoy yourselves! Oh—some facts you might not have known: Ivan and Picard are left-handed!! Watch them the next time they do the critical hit thing—it's easier to see then.

Zrike: A guess! A guess! Sadly, I can only say that while all of you are close, there are but three people who have the correct answer, and they know whom they are. But you are all close. As far as I know, her class won't change for a while.

Presley: Like I said, I won't answer your guesses. *blushes* thanks for the compliment though. You too, zrike. Geez, I'm going to be blushing for ages...

General Failure: You know, it would help if I could remember what your prediction was.

0==|=R=a=g=n=a=r=o=k=: I can't tell you what her element is! That's half of the story, almost!

Jupiter Girl: You think I'm going to just TELL you who the mysterious figure was? No way. You'll meet that figure eventually.

Triad Orion: If I get one more pizza, I will come with my racket and spend a day yelling 'SIT BOY' at you. Promise.

Chapter Twenty-One: Bitten by Mutant Luggage

It had rained the previous night, and the sun rose on a thick fog that only gradually was burned away by the sun's warmth. A light breeze blew that misty morning, twining itself around the lone figure sitting near the edge of a cliff.

Ivan sighed, shivering, and with a wave of his hand sent the breezes away. It was a cold morning—winter would be coming full force to the north. Technically, he was still in the north, but not as far north as he had been in Vault. He yawned, then shook his head rapidly. He had been up late into the night, speaking to the monks of the temple about the forest they had to pass through in order to reach the next city, Xian. He and Zoe had heard several tales of Mogall Forest, including that one could only go through if they mastered the powers of the unseen force.

This was what he had been contemplating, and had been here for about an hour, waking when the fog was so thick it could not be seen through. He estimated that he was running on about three hours of sleep, but it seemed natural to him to wake up early. He had noticed Zoe's bed empty, but could find no sign of her. Thinking of that, he reminded himself to thank the master of Fuchin Temple for generously offering them residence as long as they needed it.

He heard sounds down below, and noticed Garet, Mia and Isaac walking from the building into the increasingly sunny day. Isaac waved up to him, and Ivan waved back, standing and leaping from the cliff in what was a wild rush of adrenaline for a sleepy Jupiter Adept. Mia gasped, and Isaac and Garet shared alarmed looks, but Ivan caught himself in midair about a foot off the ground, setting his feet down lightly and grinning.

"Show-off," Garet muttered. "I oughta fry your head."

"But you won't," Mia said with a little smirk.

"How can you know? I mean, no, I won't, but…oh, you Mercury Adepts. Think you know everything. Sheesh."

"You'll learn, Garet," Mia said, obviously riding high from the previous night's rain—even though she hadn't been awake to enjoy it. "Tell me Isaac, did you enjoy the ride here?"

"Can I remember the ride here?" he asked with a laugh. "I know we stopped once, for something, but that's about it. Ivan, where's Zoe?"

"She woke before me, and I didn't see her out here or on my way through the building. But she's somewhere, I don't doubt. Off exploring one thing or another, as usual."

His words were directly followed by the appearance of a Jupiter Djinni. Ivan frowned and searched his mind, and the answer from both of his Djinn was a sleepy *Good morning, Ivan*. *Hm,* Ivan thought. *I must be more tired than I realized*. That left, of course, only one possibility. "Zap?"

"Ivan. Hello. Mia, Garet, Isaac. Please, come with me," Zap said in his usual 'I-know-more-than-you-could-ever-guess' manner.

"Where?" Isaac asked.

"To the edge of that forest south of here."

"Mogall Forest?" Ivan asked, suddenly suspicious. "Why?"

"It is of utmost importance that you hurry. Go any slower and they will meet you halfway."

"Who will meet us halfway?"

"Come, please," Zap said, zipping off in a display of Jupiter speed, leaving a fast-fading trail of violet light behind him.

"I don't like the way this is going," Mia said, a puzzled frown on her face. "Zap is, as far as I can tell, cryptic to the infinite power…but I've never understood what he's said before."

"You do now?" Garet asked.

"I can hazard a guess. And if my guess is correct, it means we run," Mia said, and did so immediately, trying to force the guess from her mind. It wasn't working.

"Ivan!" Garet called. Ivan started; he realized he had begun to doze off on his feet. With insane speed he caught up to the others and passed them. Had he had any breath to do so, Garet would have yet again called out that Ivan was showing off his superior agility.

Ivan, despite having to run at extreme speeds, was continually shaking himself out of his drowsy state. *Gust!*

Yes, Ivan? Gust answered, adding something that could only be described as a mental yawn at the end.

Go on ahead and then go back to the others and tell them what's going on, please, he thought-spoke, and Gust instantly complied, appearing in the air and rocketing forward. Ivan, however, was forced to slow down. He didn't think he'd ever been this tired.

"Ivan? How did we catch up to you?" Isaac asked.

"Lack of sleep," Ivan said tiredly. Isaac raised an eyebrow. "What?"

Mia sighed, shaking her head with the barest hint of a smile. "How much sleep did you get?"

"About three hours, I think."

"Are you trying to give us a battle weakness or something?"

"I already *do* give you a battle weakness," Ivan said with a grin.

"I will refrain from comment," Isaac said, his eyes focused on something he appeared to have spotted up ahead. "Ivan, I just had the most interesting image enter my mind. A present of yours?"

"Gust's, actually. I sent her on ahead. What did she say?"

"Not good," Mia said, her pace picking up considerably, with Isaac following suit. Ivan slowed down a bit more, until he was running at an even stride with Garet.

"How goes it?" Ivan asked. Garet's only response was a series of pants and gasps that would have roughly translated to, "How can you ask me that? Can't you see I'm dying here?"

"Very well then," Ivan said, holding back a grin. For a while, they were silent, Garet to save breath, Ivan to save energy. Of course, when they reached the edge of the forest, both of them stopped dead in their tracks. Isaac was keeping himself busy, knocking down many of the new horde of

enemies with bursts of green light. Mia stood in front of Zoe, who was seated on a rock, looking at the ground dazedly.

"Heads up, Isaac!" Garet yelled, followed shortly by, "Flare Wall!" which Isaac expertly ducked.

"Heads down, if you want to be logical," Ivan said, funny without a touch of humor in his voice. "Would someone care to expl…oh, why bother? Plasma!" Purplish bolts of lightning rained down on the enemies, causing several of them to fade and disappear.

"Flint!" Isaac called, and the Venus Djinni appeared instantly.

"What's up, Isaac? Hey, it's a party!" Flint cried happily, diving on the nearest enemy and destroying it.

"Fever!" A bright red flash, followed by the sound of another monster greying out, put a grin on Garet's face. "She may be crazy, but I can't deny she knows how to have fun."

"I can think of something more fun," said Zoe, standing and grinning evilly. "I want revenge," she said evenly, completely ignoring Mia's outright order to sit back down. "No monster, let alone a horde of them, can lure my friends here by using me, and then try to kill them."

"That's what they were doing?" Isaac asked, shocked.

"There was a man with them. I didn't recognize him, though his voice was familiar. He told me this. He said it didn't matter how much things had changed, it was still inevitable that we lose."

"Zoe?"

"Isaac?"

"I'm up for some revenge," Isaac said, matching Zoe's grin and evil tone of voice. Zoe grinned, a real one this time, as did Garet. "Shall we?"

"Let's do it! I summon Mercury!"

"I summon Venus!"

"I summon Mars!" At Garet's yell, the spirits of the three summons descended on the remaining monsters, making short work of them.

"Battles just aren't a challenge anymore," Garet said disappointedly. "I want some real action."

"That you will have, children," said a voice behind them. All of the Adepts turned to face two monks from the temple. "Our master wishes to speak with all of you."

"Hey! He talks in the right direction!"

"Strong, you are. Go now to the temple must you. Important it is," said the other monk. Garet groaned.

"Decipher," Isaac muttered. Behind his back, he waved a hand, and there was a momentary glowing green light that faded quickly.

"Thanks, Isaac," Zoe said, grinning.

"No problem. It comes with the whole "saving the world" thing. Now, like the guy says, to the temple must we go…or something like that." At this, Garet, Zoe and Mia laughed, but Ivan was uncharacteristically silent.

"Ivan?" Mia asked, looking back over her shoulder at him. He was leaning up against a tree trunk—fast asleep on his feet! "Oh, Ivan. Come on—you missed all the fun," she said, grabbing his sleeve and pulling him upright.

"Yah! Mia, what gives? And I didn't miss *all* the fun; I *did* send in those," Ivan stopped for a moment and yawned. "Lightning bolts."

"I am never letting you stay up listening to stories again, kid," Zoe said.

"Kid?! I'm only a year younger than you are!"

"I choose not to comment."

"Why you…oh, never mind."

"Isaac, did we ever argue like that?" Garet asked. Isaac raised an eyebrow at him. "What?"

"We did, many times. Maybe you've been hit on the head one time too many," Isaac added, though his grin showed he was joking. Garet sighed, grinning as well.

When they entered the temple building itself, they found the grey-haired master, Nyunpa by name, seated upon a rug on the floor, with four torches surrounding him.

"Hey Garet," Ivan whispered, nudging him.

"Yeah?" Garet asked in an equally quiet voice.

"There are four lights!" Ivan said excitedly. Garet gave him an odd look and took a step away.

"I thought he wanted to speak to us," Mia said confusedly. "Excuse me, Nyunpa sir? Hello? You asked us

here, did you not?" But she got no answer from the seated man.

"Ivan," Zoe said as an idea came to mind, "why not read his mind?"

"What for?" Ivan asked. "I don't usually like reading private thoughts."

"She may have a point," Isaac said, smiling. "Go on, Ivan." With a sigh, Ivan stood to one side of the man and extended a hand. The air shimmered multiple colors as his Psynergy let him read the thoughts of the master. Through a Psynergetic link, the other Adepts heard these thoughts as well.

"Mmmm…who is that? Who speaks to my mind?" was the incoming thought, and at once Nyunpa's eyes opened and he jumped up, looking at the Adepts and facing Isaac. "Young master…was that your voice I heard in my mind just now?"

"Not mine, no," Isaac said truthfully, "but it was Ivan, and he travels with me."

"I knew it!" Nyunpa exclaimed, causing all the Adepts to take a defensive step back. "You follow…*them*…do you not?"

"*Them*? Saturos and Menardi? Yes."

"I knew it!"

"He sure knows a lot for a guy who sits on the floor all day," Ivan muttered. Garet laughed quietly.

"But you must go through Mogall Forest, the endless woods. The forest itself—"

"The forest is a mystery, a puzzle," Zoe finished. "No ordinary man can get from one side to the other."

"But you think you can, is that it, Nyunpa?" Mia asked. Isaac prayed silently that this wouldn't be a repeat of the Bilibin incident.

"Indeed, perhaps I could," Nyunpa said. "If you can endure the trials in the waterfall grotto, I will tell you."

"Tell us what?"

"Will you take the test?" Nyunpa countered. The Adepts looked at each other, and a single nod was shared between all of them.

"Yes," Isaac answered. The room grew dark, and, by squinting, Isaac could see faint invisible waves emanating from Nyunpa. *Psynergy*? he wondered.

"Do not worry," said Nyunpa. "You will be permitted to enter the grotto. Go now, Isaac!"

"I never told you my name," he said calmly.

"Just remember, you are not the only ones who can read minds," Nyunpa said with a sly grin. He then returned to his seated position on the floor, closing his eyes and leaving the Adepts feeling quite confused.

"Let's be going, then," Isaac said casually, turning and walking out. The others, with a unanimous shrug, followed him, down several stairs (Ivan had complained loudly on the

climb up) and jumping across the slippery stumps to reach where a monk stood before the waterfall.

"I have heard of your test from master Nyunpa," said the monk. "You may pass." He jumped out of the way, leaving a doorway semi-visible behind the waterfall.

"Garet, don't say it," Isaac said, holding up a hand before Garet could begin to protest more water. One by one, the Adepts passed through the doorway. Amazingly, when they reached the other side, each of them was completely dry. Mia stepped up to a pillar with writing engraved on it.

"The dragon's flame illuminates the path of truth in darkness," she read aloud. "A dragon? In here? Wouldn't the monks have told us?"

"Maybe that's the test we have to pass," Zoe suggested.

"Fighting a dragon? Isn't that a bit harsh?" Ivan asked warily.

"Let's just take it one step at a time. Look," Isaac continued, "over there is a treasure chest! Ivan, why don't you cross and get what's inside?"

"Cross how?"

"I think you run across on that log."

"*What*?"

"Surely a Jupiter Adept with such perfect balance," mocked Garet, "can do something as simple as this." Ivan frowned and stepped onto the log, and began to run forward. Amazingly, he found that it turned with him almost

by itself, and he was across in no time and with no trouble. He approached the treasure chest and lifted the lid.

"Hey! There's nothing in heeeeeeeeaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAGH!" Ivan's final word turned into a yelp of surprise and pain as the chest sprouted eyes, legs, and, what was concerning Ivan the most at that point, teeth. Said teeth had latched onto Ivan's right hand and showed no sign of letting go anytime soon. "That Mimic bit me!"

"Mimic?" said four voices.

"Mimic!" Ivan yelled back, not even bothering to comment on how idiotic it sounded to be repeating the word "Mimic," and therefore doing as the name suggested, over and over. "Plasma!" Giant lightning bolts struck the Mimic, but appeared to have very little effect. It did, however, release Ivan's hand, which he instantly dropped to his side. With his other hand, he reached for his weapon.

The Mimic chose that moment to attack Ivan, who responded first with a groan of, "Why is it always *me*?" and second with an upraised left hand and a cry of, "Whirlwind!"

"I think it's Wind resistant," Garet speculated from across the water. "How can we get over there? There's no way Ivan's going to have all the fun!"

"I can't fly us *all* over," Zoe said. "I'm not even that good at it myself, unless it's necessary."

"Then we can do this," Mia said, crouching by the edge of the water and extending her right hand. "Frost!" she said, and a beam of blue Psynergy shot from her fingertips, freezing an area of water just wide enough for the Adepts to

walk on single file. "It'll be slippery, but I think Ivan may be having a bit *too* much fun."

In fact, Ivan would have been enjoying himself, if the Mimic hadn't bitten and scratched him already. He was jumping and leaping about as though only a gust of wind himself, all the while trying to come up with a plan. As he rushed around, he reached into his bag and tried to find something that could help him.

Meanwhile, Isaac and Mia had made across the ice bridge, with Zoe and Garet close behind. A loud cracking noise, followed by a splash and the sound of cursing, signified that Garet's weight had been enough to crack the fragile ice.

"We could have swum," Zoe said contemplatively. "I prefer this, but I suppose Garet doesn't." After a few moments of watching Ivan duck, jump and spring, Isaac, Mia and Zoe looked at each other, at a loss.

"If we try and use Psynergy, we run the risk of hitting Ivan with it," Isaac said, speaking for them all. "Ivan! Hold up for a second!"

"Yes?" Ivan said, coming to an instant stop behind the mutant luggage.

"Stay there."

"Aye-aye sir." As Ivan said this, the Mimic let out a sort of half-roar, half-screech, and Ivan was surrounded by a faint orange glow. Covering his ears, Ivan felt his Psynergy power being pulled from him and…*and into that twisted excuse for a suitcase*, Ivan realized.

"Oh good. My turn," said Isaac, a sly glint in his blue eyes as he held out a hand. "Spire!" Seemingly from the ceiling a giant, sharp stone spire crashed onto the Mimic's head (or lid). It made a sound equivalent to a growl and lashed out at Isaac, sending him flying back along the frost bridge, though he stopped before he reached the spot where Garet had fallen in.

"Volcano!" Garet, who had pulled himself up, soaking wet, onto the Mimic's previous place of residence, was quite happy to feel himself dry off in the heat of his attack. "Nothing like frying a freakish imitation of treasure."

"Well, no, there isn't," Mia agreed, and Garet stared at her. "But there's nothing quite like freezing one either. Ice!" The Mimic, backing away from Garet's fire, headed straight into the onslaught of needle-sharp ice crystals. "We are kicking serious…um…"

"I believe the word is 'tail,'" Ivan said, "though, in light of the Mimic's lack thereof, let's kick its weakest point."

"And how would you know what that was?" Zoe asked. "Did you mind read it or something?"

"Well, no, I doubt I could understand a monster's mind. The thought that a Psynergy Stone may have warped a treasure chest isn't a comforting one, either. But really, the most valuable part of real treasure chest is what?"

"What's inside it," offered Isaac.

"Exactly."

"I get what he means," Garet said, pulling something from his bag.

"What is that, Garet?" Zoe asked, dodging the Mimic's teeth as it lashed out at her.

"A Smoke Bomb," he said with a hint of an evil tone. "Isaac, get it to open its lid!"

"Are you crazy Garet? Never mind—I'd rather not know." Isaac stepped in front of the Mimic and raised his newest weapon, a Broad Axe. *I do like the fact that this temple seems to have an extensive armory*, he thought. "Take your best shot, suitcase," he said menacingly.

The Mimic made that sound again, which by now the Adepts took to be some strange way of calling on Psynergy. Of course, this sound involved the Mimic's version of a mouth and the act of opening that mouth, which it did. Garet snapped his fingers, lighting the Smoke Bomb, and threw it into the open lid of the mutant luggage. For a moment, it didn't seem to realize what was happening.

Of course, eventually it did, and it opened its lid again to fire the bomb right back at the Adepts. Ivan saw this, as did Zoe, and the two of them leapt into the air, both of them landing right-foot-first atop the lid, sending it crashing down into the Mimic's body. It tried to throw them off, but inside of it there was a sudden explosion.

The explosion, however, wasn't contained within the Mimic itself. It threw Zoe and Ivan in opposite directions. The former flipped completely over in the air and landed in a sort of crouch just shy of where Garet had fallen into the water, out on the ice path. Ivan was thrown towards the wall, but spun around and kicked off of it, taking his turn at splashing loudly into the water.

"We certainly do have some kind of luck, that we do," Isaac said with a grin. He bent and lifted a rather charred

bag of golden coins. "Seems it was more treasure chest than we thought."

"Ivan, get out of the water. Wet isn't a great thing to add to your list," Mia said.

"My list?" Ivan queried, pulling himself up onto dry land and shaking the water from his hair.

"Wet is something I'm not capable of getting rid of," Mia replied.

"Yes, in fact wet is something she's quite good at creating," Garet muttered. "So is frozen. And cold. Most definitely cold."

"You're babbling," Isaac pointed out.

"I'm on a battle high."

"Save your energy. This place is probably crawling with wonderful little monsters that will try to take our heads and use them as tomorrow's lunch."

"That painted *such* a charming picture in my mind," Zoe said dryly.

"I hope so."

Garet, about to add in his most recent opinion of cavern terrors eating an Adept sandwich at noon, was cut off by Mia's quiet, "Ply," and the blue light that followed it.

"I'm still wet," Ivan commented.

"I told you I couldn't get rid of that," Mia said with a grin. "I could freeze the water, though."

"No, thanks. I'd rather be wet than a human icicle."

"Come on," Isaac said. "We have to pass whatever test we're supposed to pass in here and find out whatever we're supposed to hear from Nyunpa." The others nodded, and they crossed the ice bridge back to the pillar with the writing on it, and in a very creative way rode the next log across to a path that led them under an overhang and into the next large cavern.

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Vil: Think I took long enough?

Kaede: Yes.

Avaria: That I do.

Vil: Avaria, you've been watching too much TV.

Avaria: That I have.

Vil: ARGH! Anyway…here is the magic arrow for you! The next chapter takes us deep into the Fuchin Falls Cave. Be ready—there is indeed a test in store for our Adept friends.

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Chapter 23: Chapter TwentyTwo: Force of Habit

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Here's a new idea—I thought I'd respond to your reviews *before* I started writing the actual chapter. Maybe it'll make some sort of…odd…little…difference…or something. Oh, and keep in mind, while this is supposed to follow the game storyline, there are noticeable differences from the game itself (for example, Isaac talks!) so there will be…noticeable story differences too. Not like you couldn't already tell…

Oh, and another note. There has been a bit of a rearranging of weapons. For those who are curious, by this chapter Isaac has the Arctic Blade, Garet a Broad Axe, Ivan the Blessed Ankh, Mia the Witch's Wand, and Zoe the Elven Rapier.

ACK! Some of the italics aren't catching. Because of this, I will from here on out denote mind-to-mind speaking, Jupiter Adept style, with …. For Djinni-to-adept thought, it's inverted. …. Thoughts to oneself use ~…~. Hopefully this will only be fore this chapter, as I will not extend italics again. The only permanent thing is adept-to-adept brackets.

VI: Mimics freaked me out too, before I figured out that in Weyard it's perfectly normal to have an ordinary treasure chest suddenly sprout legs and teeth and attack you.

Griffinkhan: Jupiter Lighthouse is like that with Mimics. Drives me crazy. And, I do get what you're saying, but mostly it's because I write when I'm in a good mood, and often the characteristics I give one character tend to leak

over into the others…*shrugs* just the way it happens sometimes.

Alayea: I left that part out partially because I didn't quite have it in my head, but also because sometimes it's more fun to leave the readers to envision parts for themselves. So, for all of you, yes, that light *was* Isaac and Mia and Garet, but as to how they made it back to the temple…that's up to your imagining.

Alex: I got two rackets for Tristan. I'll use my sister's on Triad if I get his pizza.

Mare Serenitatis: No, actually Zoe's Flight is more like the barriers in Kolima Forest…they only come around when they're needed.

Jupiter Girl: Well no, Ivan doesn't get sick, but you gotta learn not to put those ideas in my head! The test will indeed be one quite…unexpected…

You see. With six reviews, I can answer each one. That's ok, but I'd rather have ten reviews and only answer one or two. ;)

Chapter Twenty-Two: Force of Habit

Isaac looked around with a sigh. Aside from the occasional spikes sticking out of the floor, this room was just like any other. "Watch your step," he warned, something that was moderately difficult after a few hours of cave exploration. Of course, as the violet blur that was Ivan sped by, Isaac wondered why he even bothered with warnings.

"Ivan, could you stop that for one second?" Garet asked in an annoyed tone. "I'm starting to see purple streaks

without you even being in front of me. I might be forced to use violence."

Ivan answered, but his answer came out sounding a lot like 'bitismushfnorunitsefir,' which none of the Adepts could figure out, even when they replayed the words at a slower speed in their minds. He had just acquired Zephyr, a Jupiter Djinni, after a short battle, and the power of this particular Djinni appeared to be an increase in the already-inherent agility of Jupiter Adepts.

"The effects of speed on the already-very-fast," Garet said dryly. There was a violet flash, barely a hint of movement, and approximately a second later Garet frowned. "I think I've just been shin-kicked at the speed of sound."

"Youbetyouhave. IsaidthatitwastomuchfunrunningwithZephyr," Ivan said again, slower this time but still at an unusually rapid pace. His random dashes all over the place were wearing off as well.

"At least this time I know what you said," Zoe said, shaking her head. "Though I think we've found the perfect way to dry you off. Call on Zephyr. I guess it goes away eventually."

"It's nice to know that Djinni-induced ultraspeed wears off after a while," Mia observed. "Let's just hope the same isn't true for any of the useful Djinn."

"Zephyrisn'tuseful?" Ivan queried, stopping to stand in front of Isaac and Mia with an incredulous stare. "Ohright. YouonlygoinforthoseDjinnthatdo*Mercury*things." Somehow, in the midst of several letters that did not belong together without a pause between, Ivan managed to sound very

mocking and put special, almost belittling emphasis on the word Mercury.

"Ivan, how much longer do you think that's going to last?" Isaac asked casually. They were approaching another door, the majority of them traveling at the normal speed, and Isaac was rolling a rather large, elliptic stone between his hands. He looked at it curiously, as he had done periodically over the past hour or so. It was a sort of transparent brownish-orange in color, with two opaque yellow lines running through it, starting at a top point and circling out and coming together at a bottom point.

"Like a cat's-eye marble," Zoe commented.

"Iwouldthinkonly-a-few-more minutes," Ivan said in response to Isaac's question, noticeably slowing with each word. His next sentence was at regular velocity, proof that he had overestimated the time. "Like a what, Zoe?"

"A cat's-eye marble. Only I've never seen an orange one before. It looks kind of…well, if I didn't know better, like a real eye."

"It's hard as a rock, though."

"It is a rock, is what I think," Garet said. "And the three of you are just paranoid from trying to fight Bone Fighters and Oozes while avoiding sharp floors."

"I won't say there isn't some truth in that," Zoe mused. "Plus Ivan looks like he's having some sort of…energy rush."

"Going superfast for even a little while is exhilarating! I'm not even tired out," he said, his grin widening as they walked through the door and into complete darkness.

"I've seen overdoses from Herbs and Antidotes that had that kind of effect," Mia muttered, and Zoe laughed. "Could we get some light? I don't want to run into any surprises."

"If I had a match," Garet began, and then remembered what he was, suddenly glad for the darkness as he blushed sheepishly.

"You're a living match," Ivan didn't fail to point out, and there was a sudden yelp and a momentary thud and a few minutes of scuffle, and then silence. "Alright, alright, I give. Someone just find the torch."

"I don't think there is one," Isaac said. His eyes had adjusted to the near-dark, for in fact there was a very dim light coming from some indiscernible source. Almost directly in front of him was a large statue of…

"A dragon?" Ivan asked, stepping closer and squinting at it.

"The dragon's flame illuminates the path of truth in darkness," Mia said again, remembering the words on the pedestal at the cave's entrance. "But it isn't alive…is it?"

"Hard as a rock," Ivan confirmed. "Definitely not living. At least, not anymore, if it even ever was."

"Hard as a rock?" Garet asked, recalling those words from moments before. He approached the dragon sculpture and squinted in much the same way Ivan had. Slowly, almost as though afraid it would spring to life any minute, Garet walked around to the other side. He spotted it almost instantly, even in the dim light. An empty eye socket.

"Isaac! Toss me that rock!"

"What for?" Isaac asked, but throw it anyway. Garet caught it, watching its slight glow and sparkle even in the almost nonexistent light, and held it up to the hole in the dragon. Squinting more than he'd believed possible, he lined up the stone with the hole and, with a considerable amount of strength, found that it fit.

"Hey…it's…it *is* an eye…" Garet said, trailing off as the dragon's open mouth began spewing fire, lighting up the room in that sort of constant, unflickering way that wasn't common of flames.

"Well…I don't exactly see what good that did us…" Zoe began, but at a loud sound, like a large rock being moved aside, she stopped. "Hm. Maybe it activated a light-sensitive door, or something. Is that even possible?"

"It might be," Ivan speculated. "Who knows, in this place?" The sound of shifting, grinding stone grew louder, echoing about the cavern and giving the Adepts considerable reason to cover their ears. Of course, what followed the grinding and rolling was much worse.

Instead of being a sculpture, the giant dragon seemed to have come alive, and it shut its mouth, extinguishing the flame. The room went dark again, and it seemed much darker than before, since the Adepts' eyes had grown used to the light again. The dragon towered about three times Garet's height, and it glared at them with two amber eyes.

These eyes were all that could really be seen in the near-darkness, so Garet wasn't noticeable as he slowly backed away, then turned to run for a nearby doorway. Of course, he didn't count on the dragon's tail, which followed him and slammed into his back, sending him through the door and crashing into the wall of the room behind it.

There came the words, each one punctuated by a small burst of orange flame.

"***HE HAS COME***!!!"

"He has?" Ivan asked dryly. "Should we meet him?"

"***THE ONE IS HERE***! ***HE MUST BE STOPPED***!"

"Isaac," Mia asked suddenly, realizing that they might have very little time left for speaking. "Do you think…do you think the dragon is talking about you?"

"But I haven't done anything to it. It might mean Garet, or Ivan."

"Garet went flying through a wall, just now," Zoe said, having been able to just barely make out how he had ended up that way.

"Could you get to him?"

"I could try."

"Do it, then." Nodding, Zoe headed for the doorway Garet had disappeared through, leaving Isaac, Ivan and Mia facing the dragon.

"With our luck, it's weak to Mars Psynergy," Ivan remarked dryly. "But what the heck? Let's give it a try anyway." Raising the Blessed Ankh to point it at the dragon, he yawned, glad the others still couldn't see him.

"Until we figure out what *can* take this thing," Isaac said in a serious tone, "use your Djinn. The attacking ones, that is," he added, remembering Ivan's earlier fun at calling on Zephyr.

"Sure, Isaac. Gust!"

"Sleet!"

"Flint!" The dark cavern was lit at once by multicolored flashes as the three Djinn dove at the stone dragon. Neither Gust's wind bursts nor Sleet's ice barrage seemed to leave even a mark upon the beast's stone skin. Flint, however, dove at the dragon with considerable force and left a large crack in its stony hide. Something flickered in Isaac's mind, the remnants of an early conversation with the Venus Djinni, but he quickly focused again on the task at hand.

"Weak to Venus, is it?" Ivan asked.

"Looks like it," Isaac agreed. "Mia, can you—"

"Yes." Raising a hand, Mia cast Tundra, aiming at the crack in the rock, or at least where she had last seen it, for the Djinn light had faded seconds after the attacks had taken place. The dragon was now thoroughly agitated, and it lashed around with its great tail. The tail's razor-sharp tip sliced right by Ivan, tearing his shirt and scratching lightly across his stomach, and he breathed a sigh of relief for the fact that he hadn't been standing closer. The sigh became a yell when, seconds later, the tail crashed into Mia, sending her flying out into the air. Knocked unconscious, she had no idea that she was beginning the descent to the spike-covered floor below.

Isaac could guess what was going on, but didn't turn to look, partially because he knew better than to take his eyes off the dragon (or where he assumed the dragon was) and partially because he wouldn't have been able to see anything anyway, it being dark. He was remembering what Flint had told him, way back when they'd met just outside of Vale.

"A Djinni, huh? What is it you do, exactly?"

"Well, if you want to be formal about it, I strike a blow that can cleave stone. But really, I do like a good party now and then too."

With barely a thought, Isaac set Flint again, feeling his strength boost itself somewhat. Facing the dragon, or its approximate vicinity, and glancing to where he'd heard Ivan yell from, he opened his mouth to call on the Djinni again.

Then he ducked as the summoned spirit of Atalanta shot several Psynergy arrows directly through the space where, seconds ago, his head had been. Taking a moment to also dodge a random tail swipe, he shook off the adrenaline rush that came with nearly having an arrow through your skull, dodged a second tail swipe, and was blown into a nearby rock formation—his brain foggily recalled stalagmite—by a flap of the dragon's stone wings. Slowly, dazedly, he sank to the floor.

Ivan had seen, in the Psynergy light, Isaac dusking to get out of the way, but now all that was on his mind was the dragon's loud roaring, which it seemed to not only enjoy doing but enjoy doing in excess. He heard something behind him and in a flash whirled to look. Of course, he realized his mistake when not only couldn't he see what it was, he felt the monster's tail leave a deeper and much more painful scratch across his back. He heard the sound of moving stone again, and before he realized it found himself surrounded and lifted into the air by coils of rough, rocky dragon. Ivan knew what would come next. Such things usually started squeezing, after the surrounding and lifting, he decided. Might as well get it over with.

In a nearby room, Zoe had literally come face-to-face with a problem. There was a roughly Garet-sized hole in the wall, and also a pile of rocks on the other side of that hole that she didn't really want to contemplate. Garet himself was nowhere to be found, but in the middle of the room was a treasure chest.

"If it's a Mimic, it's going to wish it had hidden itself somewhere else," she said sourly, reaching out and pushing the lid open. Inside it appeared that there was nothing at all save empty air, until she saw the glint of something in the corner of the chest. She pulled it out, and found that she was holding a round object about the size of a strawberry.

"Orb of Force," said a voice in her ear, and Zoe yelped, spinning and finding no one behind her. "Psynergetic stone that lets its holder use Force Psynergy. It might help your friends out back there. Things can't be going well—the stone dragon is impervious to all but two things. One of them is Flint."

"The other, I suppose, is Force?" Zoe asked, now well aware that the voice belonged to Zap and that for once, in his own annoying way, he was being more of a help than a hindrance.

"Well no, the other one is water, in the form of years and decades of erosion, but Force couldn't hurt."

"Thanks a lot, Zap. I suppose you don't know where Garet is either?"

"No, but I am picking up that you have a good guess."

"Zap, if he's under those rocks…"

"How about one thing at a time. Go on—that dragon needs to be stopped."

"How do you propose I do that?"

"How did it start?" Zap asked slyly. Zoe paused mentally to consider this, though physically she kept on walking back the way she'd come. It was still pitch-dark, though she caught the last remnants of Atalanta's final arrow, and saw Isaac fly through the air and hit something.

It started…uh…it started…well you see…it started when I asked about that light-sensitive door. Garet put the rock in the eyehole and it started spitting fire…that's it! Zoe's thoughts whirled. "Zap! I have to get…that rock back!" The pause between her words came at the all-too-familiar sound of rock grinding against rock.

"Oh, very well done. I applaud. Now get to it!"

"How do I use one of these Psynergy rock things?" she asked, holding the Orb of Force out in an open palm. It seemed to flicker with golden light somewhere in its depths, but then stopped, though now Zoe felt as though instructions had been written across her mind on how exactly to call on Force Psynergy.

There was a strangled cry from the dragon's general direction. Ivan had predicted correctly when he had thought of it squeezing, and stone proved to be much less resilient than it had ever appeared, even as part of a living creature. He supposed that it was his Psynergy that kept him from breaking with the force of the squeeze, though he had to give the dragon credit for trying. As soon as he thought this, it squeezed harder, forcing the air from his lungs in a way he hoped he'd never have to experience again. A split second

later his mind registered the fact that he'd rather be alive and experiencing that then dead, and then he blacked out.

Isaac had shaken himself back into coherence by then, and had no idea that Zoe had returned with the possible solution to their problem. He had, however, reached in his mind the same conclusion, that to either remove or destroy that darn rock would be the way to get out alive, and he raised his hand and pointed it at the glowing eye. On the other side of the dark cavern, Zoe did the same.

"Flint!"

"Force!"

At the sound of Isaac's voice, Zoe very nearly stopped mid-cast, and Isaac likewise paused for just a moment before going on with unleashing Flint. Nevertheless, both the Djinni and the Psynergy raced for the dragon's stone eye, and Zoe and Isaac ran forward, unknowingly narrowly missing the steep drop-off onto the spikes below, only to stop inches away from each other in front of where Force and Flint were converging.

There was a sound like shattering glass, and one like a giant rockslide. Shards of something rained down on Isaac and Zoe, who managed to avoid the sharp edges for the most part. There was, of course, still no light, though it was obvious the dragon was dead—or as dead as stone could get—and in fact it seemed darker without the dragon alive.

There was a groan and a soft thud as someone hit the ground. Now in total darkness, neither Isaac nor Zoe knew who it was. Zoe couldn't even be sure Zap still perched on her shoulder, though doubtless he'd disappeared as soon as the eye had shattered.

"Isaac?"

"Zoe?"

"So it's not you on the floor, then?"

"No, and I suppose it isn't you either."

"Right."

"Okay. And it isn't…Mia! Oh gods…"

"What? What happened to Mia?" Zoe asked anxiously.

"The stupid thing's tail slammed her over the edge and she fell, as far as I know. I was kind of too preoccupied to be watching."

"Isaac?"

"Yes?"

"That wasn't your voice, was it?"

"No, it wasn't his voice!" Ivan cried raspily. "It was mine!"

"Ivan!" Isaac and Zoe said together. Of course, finding each other in the darkness would be impossible, and they had as much of a chance of running into a wall or over the edge as they did of bumping into one another. Thus, both Zoe and Isaac chose that moment to sit down.

Zoe, said a voice in her mind, and for a moment she wondered if it wasn't Zap come back to bother her about making it light or some other such thing, but then she recognized Ivan's thought-voice.

Yes, Ivan?

Did you find out about Garet? Ivan asked almost nervously. The reply came as a set of images, not a set of words, and the images included finding the Orb of Force, casting it on the dragon, and seeing, through a large hole in the wall, a pile of rocks. Oh, no. You don't think he…

I chose not to think about it, actually. Right now, I do the same. We need to find a way to make it light in here. Or at least, not so dark.

We could always—

Always what? Zoe asked, wondering why Ivan had cut himself off so abruptly. Always what, Ivan?…Ivan?! "Ivan?" she asked aloud. There was no reply. "Isaac, I think this is a problem. Have you got anything flammable on you?"

"Nothing I really feel like parting with," Isaac said in a weak attempt at humor. "Besides, we don't have anything to light fire with. Garet's…somewhere…"

"I could Charge something."

"Don't you have to throw Charge Psynergy?"

"Who knows? I've only used it once."

"There's a point. Alright…what burns? I would say wood, but we haven't got that…"

"Plants. You're a Venus Adept, aren't you?"

"Yes. With rock-based Psynergy at the moment. None of that burns, even with a powerful blast."

"You made a vine grow once, outside of Bilibin Cave, by switching Djinn with Garet, remember? Could that work here?"

"It might," Isaac agreed, "but you haven't got any Mars Djinn."

"I have one Mercury and one Jupiter. Surely one of those has to give you something."

"A headache, if it's Zap," Isaac said with a grin, though he realized no one could see it. "Try Torrent…there's something about Jupiter Djinn that just unsettles me."

"Alright," Zoe said, closing her eyes. "Torrent!" She waited for the brief blue flash as the Djinni appeared. "Switch yourself to Isaac. Let him use your power."

"Alright." For a moment or two, faint blue light outlined Isaac's now-sitting form. When it faded, Isaac grinned again, a futile attempt at letting Zoe know that he had something in mind.

"There is new Psynergy here, but it isn't Growth. Er, if I knew where you were I'd probably tell you to take a few steps back. It's called Thorn, and I'm not thinking it's called that just for show."

"Do you always talk like this in the dark? I'm about a foot to your left—you were outlined a few seconds ago."

"Actually, I think I've hit my head on a stalagmite, so yes, I might be off a little. Thorn!" Dim greenish light showed that large, thorny vines had sprouted from the ground and were collecting in a sort of bush. Without another thought, Zoe cast Charge, but a small one, because she knew an explosion would be a bad thing right about now. The fire this

produced was a welcoming orange glow, not to mention a bit of warmth in the suddenly chilly cave. Torrent returned to Zoe, who looked across the circle made by the fire at Isaac. He met her gaze with his own serious one.

Isaac then looked past Zoe, to Ivan, or at least the half of Ivan that was slumped over a giant, almost cylindrical stone. Isaac recognized this as part of the dragon's tail, and he quickly stood and walked that way, Zoe rising and following as soon as she figured out where he was going.

"No wonder he stopped answering," she half-whispered, realizing that there were still dangers in this cave that might be coming for them. Together, she and Isaac freed Ivan from the rocks and between the two of them brought him to where the fire was. Sitting on one side of him, Zoe looked across Ivan's unconscious form at Isaac. She didn't like the look on his face—it was a cross somewhere between afraid, concerned and angry. About to say something, she stopped when a sound in the darkness behind her echoed through the cavern.

She caught Isaac's gaze, this time questioning. She shook her head quickly. No, she did not know who or what it was. She did, however, recognize the fact that whatever it was, she was in the best shape to deal with it, and so quietly she stood and walked around to the wrong end of the circle of light provided by the small fire and faded into the darkness.

The light did seem to sort of dissipate, so the whole of the cavern was no longer black as a starless night, and Zoe could make out two forms sort of hovering just beyond the ring of actual light. Spirits, she thought, naming the enemy, and as quietly as she could she moved close enough to them to be able to aim. Raising a hand, she pointed two fingers.

From them shot twin fireballs, small blasts of Charge Psynergy that each collided with one Spirit. There was a momentary pause, then the Spirits shrieked, coming at Zoe fiercely.

~For a couple of apparitions,~ Zoe thought grimly, ~they are surprisingly substantial.~ Fighting in the dark against enemies who didn't need sight to take down an opponent wasn't an ideal situation, but Zoe didn't see how she could improve upon it. Pulling the Elven Rapier from its sheath (upon Isaac's finding the Arctic Blade, there had been a brief rearranging of weapons), Zoe swung wildly, unable to see exactly what she was supposed to be swinging at. She did know, however, that her sword had weapon Psynergy—she just wished she knew how to use it on command.

"Torrent!" Figuring this her safest move, Zoe unleashed her Djinni, hoping that Torrent knew without being able to see exactly where an enemy was.

Isaac watched the majority of this with growing concern and only part of his mind. The other part was focused on the continuous, and rapidly tiring, use of Cure Psynergy. For a minute or two Zoe appeared to be winning. Isaac cried out as two other Spirits materialized behind her.

Zoe, said a calm voice in her mind. She really thought she could learn to abhor that voice.

Zap.

Use Force, Zoe. Bounce it off that rock to your right, Zap said urgently.

Use "the" Force, she mentally corrected almost automatically. She stopped, and it seemed that time stopped

with her. There was a momentary sense of déjà vu, the sound of another person's voice saying those exact words, and a memory of blue, green and red lights spiraling in intricate patterns. Then time picked up where it left off and Zoe pointed at the rock Zap had mentioned.

"Force!" she cried, and a wave of colorless Psynergy, because that's what it was, struck the rock and rebounded at odd angles, taking out both the spirits in front of and behind her. A stray one bounced through a doorway and blasted apart a pile of rocks with a loud crash. A second leftover Force beam struck something on a side wall, and the room was suddenly flooded with light.

Isaac and Zoe gasped. Floating, it seemed, at about the level of the higher floor, was Mia. She was still unconscious, but she had not fallen to a very painful and messy death, and Isaac and Zoe recognized this as a good thing.

Garet opened his eyes and shook himself off. It felt like he'd just been buried in a giant rockslide. But that was absurd. Slowly, cautiously, he walked into the now brightly-lit room and looked at the others, who looked back at him with large grins, Zoe in particular.

Without much ceremony and with a lot of stiffness, Ivan found himself waking up. He sighed and opened his eyes, and with Isaac's help rose to a sitting position. He smiled when he saw Garet, and, for reasons unknown to anyone else, took a nice, deep breath and grinned all the wider, obviously enjoying himself. ~Jupiter Adepts,~ Isaac thought with a shake of his head.

"Thanks, Isaac," Ivan said. "How are we going to get Mia off of that…well, out of the air?"

"I'll go," Garet said, and he looked to be remarkably in one piece for someone who'd just been thrown through a wall and crushed under a few large boulders.

It was at about that time that Zoe collapsed.

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Vil: Well? You like it? Hmm? The next will come soon—school is over in almost exactly a month. Hope you enjoyed reading. Have questions? Leave a review! Or email me—phoenixbright@yahoo.com

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Chapter 24: Chapter TwentyThree: It's a Jungle in Th...

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Welcome to chapter 23! I hope you're all still having fun!! On to the reviews, now…

Leilani: You know…that name looks familiar…anyway. Thanks for reading! Thanks also for the candy corn! Yahoo!!

Alayea: Thanks. It seems like the majority of you liked the dragon attacking rather than sitting there doing nothing. The only 'dungeon' without a boss is pitifully easy, isn't it? *raises hand also* I agree with that too. As long as you don't kill them, I'm ok with it!

General Failure: You find that part out in this chapter. You'll see.

Griffinkhan: Glad you liked it. That bridge is sad. You can't even fall off the thing. Heck, you don't even have to go through half the dungeon if you know where the bridge is. Personally I like the Flint thing. Would you believe I thought of that solution at *school* one day? Scary, isn't it?

Isaac says Booga: Love the name. Anyway, he got thrown into a stalagmite by the dragon, remember, and that's what he hit his head on.

I'm happy you all liked my version of events so much! As usual, if anything gets confusing, ask about it in a review. Now read, you!

Chapter Twenty-Three: It's a Jungle in There!

It had been about an hour since Zoe had collapsed, and Isaac's mind was no closer to a good reason why. It had been obvious that no enemy had struck, and nothing like a rock or stone had hit her either.

Ivan sat on a rock in the far corner, with one Jupiter Djinni on each shoulder and one on his head. That lofty (considering the usual Djinni height) position was held by Gust. Four sets of eyes stared down at the object in Ivan's hand, the Orb of Force, with considerable perplexity.

"Istilldon'tgethowit'ssosmallandholdssomuchPsynergy," Zephyr said. Ivan took a second to sort Zephyr's sentence into separate words, and nodded his agreement.

"It destroyed all of the Spirits, somehow lit up the room and, apparently, freed Garet from some large rocks," Gust added. The tone of her voice made Ivan grin. It was the voice of someone who took pleasure in solving puzzles.

"How is it used?" Breeze asked. Ivan shrugged. "Perhaps that would give the answer to your questions, if you knew."

"I know someone who *does* know," Ivan said with a malicious grin. *Zap!* He thought-called. *I need to ask you a question!*

"Coming, coming," Zap said rather haughtily, appearing in the air over Zoe. She was laying, unconscious still, between Garet and Mia, one of whom was attempting to cook something and the other of whom wore a facial expression similar to Isaac's, only a good deal more perplexed, and currently rather startled at the sudden appearance of a Jupiter Djinni. "What did you want?"

"Uh-oh, Isaac," Garet said with a grin. "The Jupiter Djinn and their Adept are having a caucus. It might be a plot against us!" Garet dissolved into laughter before he had finished his sentence.

"Just make sure you don't turn that…whatever it was…into smoldering—oh, you've already done that, I see." Isaac motioned to the hunk of black something that had been Garet's cooking attempt. This time it was Isaac's turn to laugh at Garet's outraged expression.

"What made Zoe collapse?" Ivan asked Zap, staring down at the Orb of Force in his hand. "Was it this?"

"Yes and no," Zap said, in his typical cryptic way.

"And that means?" Garet called.

"Perhaps I had better tell all of you at the same time," Zap remarked.

"We're all listening. And we aren't going anywhere soon," Isaac pointed out. "You might as well tell us now."

"Alright, alright," Zap began. "You must understand that Force Psynergy does not take its power from any one element alone, though it can be used by any Adept of any element, provided they can utilize adequate control. However, in certain situations it performs entirely of its own accord, and doing this requires nothing but an accessible source of power."

"Run that by me again?" Mia asked distractedly, obviously still deep in thought about something else. Of course, the Adepts had long ago figured out that she had, by luck, landed on an invisible bridge, the original way into the room containing the Orb of Force.

"Force Psynergy has a mind of its own," Ivan surmised. The other Djinn nodded.

"Go on," Isaac said calmly.

"Well," Zap continued, "due to the dire and urgent nature of the previously impending situation and the number of trials and difficulties manifesting themselves in her mind, Zoe's use and insufficient control of Force Psynergy resulted in the power itself becoming a solution to suit each problem. To do this, not only did it completely drain and put to use every remaining fragment of her Psynergetic power, it had to draw a considerable sum from her own living energy as well. The result of this was as you saw and see now. She is not dead, but any efforts on the part of any of you will be to no avail until the appropriate time."

"Whoa," Garet said, shaking his head. "Ivan?"

"Yes?" Ivan asked, looking up from staring at the Orb again.

"What did he say?"

"What am I, a thesaurus?" Ivan asked hotly. "I understood it, and I'm younger—I don't see why you didn't."

"*Ivan*," Isaac said warningly. Ivan sighed.

"Oh, fine. Force has a mind of its own, so when Zoe lost control it drew off all the energy it would need to fix whatever problems she was thinking of right at that moment. I would bet that those problems were the Spirits, the lack of light, and Garet. She was already low on Psynergy from walking through the cave and fighting whatever we came across, so she didn't have enough for

Force to fix everything. So it used her life energy, so much that it knocked her out."

"Then if I try my Psynergy…" Mia began, trailing off as the thought finished itself in her head.

"No good," Ivan agreed.

"Why couldn't Zap just put it in plain words like that?" Garet asked.

"He is apparently of the long-winded persuasion," Isaac said, grinning after a moment. "No pun meant."

"What?"

"He likes to use words. Big ones, and often." By this time the Djinni in question had disappeared again, as had all of Ivan's. Ivan himself pocketed the Orb of Force, his mind still puzzling over the idea that it wasn't attuned to just one particular element.

"Maybe we should be thinking about getting out of here," Mia said, also standing. Isaac reached out a hand and brought the rock up around the fire in a miniature earthquake, standing as Garet also stood, carrying Zoe.

"Why is this familiar?" Garet asked no one in particular as they headed back the way they had come.

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Thus it was only Isaac, Garet and Ivan who returned to Nyunpa with the Orb of Force.

"Excellent, excellent!" he cried as they entered, jumping to his feet with a smile on his face. "I am glad to see

you master the secrets of Fuchin Temple!"

"Thanks. It wasn't exactly a vacation, you know," Garet muttered.

"We monks call the power you have obtained Ki," Nyunpa continued, ignoring Garet completely. Isaac, after elbowing Garet in the ribs, raised an eyebrow at Nyunpa's statement.

"You seem confused, Isaac," Nyunpa said.

"Not confused. Just bored," Garet mumbled, rubbing his side. This time Ivan shifted backwards and stood on his foot.

"A little, I suppose," Isaac said.

"This is called "force" by the western world, but it is really spiritual power. Use this power to go through the forest." Nyunpa's voice had taken on a toneless quality.

"What would happen if we let that energy loose in the forest?" Ivan asked.

"You are curious, yes? Monsters that wait in hiding will show themselves."

"I don't see how that will help us any," Garet said loudly. "We've had enough monsters for more than our lifetimes doubled."

"You would try to defeat these monsters. Sometimes," he went on, with a glance at Garet, "you must let go of your belief that fighting solves problems. These monsters are cowardly. They will run from you when they are seen. They

are creatures of the woods and do not get lost there. Go now. Quite a journey awaits you."

With that, Nyunpa sat again, almost instantly deep in meditation. Isaac, Garet and Ivan looked at each other and shrugged. The three of them walked out the door, to be greeted by two smiling faces. Mia and Zoe stood near one of the windows, and had obviously heard most of the conversation, if not all of it.

"Nice to see you with us again," Isaac said with an acknowledging nod. Zoe smiled and nodded back. "Ivan, you've still got the Orb of Force, right?"

"Yes," Ivan said, pulling it from his pocket. "Right here."

"Concentrate hard when you use it, ok?"

"Right."

"Come on then. We've got a forest to pass through." Isaac again led the way under the thick covering of trees. It was very cool and dim inside, the leafy branches blocking most of the light. Directly in front of the Adepts was a large tree stump.

Directly to the right of the large stump was a sort of creature standing on a smaller stump. It was a large creature, but forest life must have made it timid, because it jumped inside the giant stump before the Adepts had walked even three steps into the forest. And that wasn't the only thing about it that was odd.

"It was green," Mia said quietly, as though quite willing to admit insanity if this statement proved false.

"Yes, it was," Garet agreed. "Shaped like a monkey, too. At least I'm not the only one," he added in a low voice. Seeing giant green monkeys when others saw nothing did not, in his opinion, place him on the highly sane side of the scale.

"Did you notice that the farther we go along the road, the stranger things get?" Ivan asked. "Rats wielding weapons like a battalion, talking trees, mysterious cloaked figures, smart lizards, and treasure chests that bite. And *now* they throw giant green monkeys at us. What next, I wonder?" Ivan paused for a moment, fabricating something in his mind. "Deadly statues that spit?"

"Don't give fate ideas," Isaac suggested.

"As far as I'm concerned, fate has enough good ideas of its own," said Garet. "Are we going forward or not?"

"It's like a maze in here," Zoe said, shaking her head. "I remember them saying that last night. Almost impossible to navigate. Quite literally a jungle."

"That's what this is for," Ivan said, holding out the Orb of Force. "Nyunpa said that the monsters of the forest would run away in the direction of the exit." Holding the Orb in one hand, he pointed his other one at the large stump and whispered "Force."

A blast of yellow-colored Psynergy led by a closed fist shot forth from Ivan's hand and gave the hollow stump a good whack. The monster jumped from the stump, saw the Adepts, and fled southward.

"On we go, then," Garet said with a sigh.

"At least there aren't any stairs," Ivan offered.

"Nothing really high to fall from, either," Mia added.

"And, if we're lucky, no talking trees," Zoe said fervently. "I've had my fill of those."

"Agreed," Isaac said with a smile. Things were back to normal, alright.

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"Ragnarok!"

"Tundra!"

"Heat Wave!"

"Hey, Ivan! Some help here!" Ivan looked up at the sound of Isaac's voice. He rather liked what he was seeing now compared to what he had been seeing previously. They were engaged in battle with several bat-like Dirges, a Bone Fighter, and a Spirit. There had previously been another Bone Fighter. It had used some sort of odd Psynergy to call up a blade. Said blade had aimed itself at Ivan and struck hard, and fast.

"I don't like holes where they don't belong," he muttered vaguely, before pulling himself to his feet again. "Ray!"

"Storm!" Zoe's and Ivan's Psynergies struck together, taking down almost all of the Dirges and the Spirit. Despite himself, Garet breathed a sigh of relief. The Spirit had been his main concern—for a while, one of its attacks had made him quite dizzy.

"I summon Kirin!" he called, and the fiery Summon descended on the remaining Dirges and the Bone Fighter,

destroying them.

"There isn't anything left," Ivan muttered as Mia cast a quick Ply. "No bones, no other inconveniently disgusting bits…not even a pile of ashen remains. Does that bother any of you?"

"I'd rather not think about it," Mia admitted.

"So is there anything around here besides giant hollow tree stumps, green monkeys, and general forestry?" Garet asked, scanning the undergrowth for signs of anything else out looking for a fight. The words of Nyunpa rang in his mind suddenly, and he frowned. *Sometimes you must let go of your belief that fighting solves problems*.

"Tell that to the things that attack *us*," he muttered.

"What, Garet?" Zoe asked, looking up from the map.

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Djinni!" Isaac cried, grinning excitedly. "Venus Djinni!"

"You'd think he had some kind of Djinn radar or something," Zoe said, shaking her head. "Go on and get it then, Isaac. We have fluorescent green monkeys to force from hiding," she added, laughing along with the others at the pun.

"It'll probably fight you," Mia pointed out. "I've had enough battles for one day, really. Is there a way to end this quickly?"

"We could just all-out summon on the thing," Ivan suggested.

"Haven't heard a better solution all day," Garet said, mentally putting his two Djinn on standby. "Have you noticed that we don't rattle off the criteria of Djinn or Summons anymore?" he added.

"It saves time," Isaac said distractedly. He was steadily heading toward the Djinni. "Everyone ready?" The others looked at each other.

"Whenever you are."

"Sure."

"What've we got to lose?"

"The world, maybe."

"Point. Yes, Isaac, we're ready," Ivan said with a nod.

"Good. I summon Ramses!"

"I summon Nereid!"

"I summon Procne!" Ivan said, a wide grin on his face. Three Jupiter Djinn had enhanced his summoning capabilities, and the giant bird that was the summoned embodiment of Procne would rise above the Venus Djinni, pulling it upwards in a whirlwind and throwing it down again with the same wind.

"Nice trick," Garet said, grinning. "I summon Kirin!"

"Twice in a row?" Mia asked. "Aren't Forge and Fever still recovering?"

"Isaac stalled us enough with his getting closer that they both set themselves again."

"Doesn't that take its toll on your Psynergy?"

"It might. I haven't had the time to think about it." The four Summons struck the Venus Djinni simultaneously. There was quite a brilliant show of flashing Psynergetic light, and it seemed for a few seconds that the Venus Djinni would be disintegrated by the pure elemental power.

The air around the Adepts shimmered as the Summons faded, and everything seemed to be tinted a deep green. The Venus Djinni dissolved into a brighter light, rising high into the air and coming down again on top of Isaac. Isaac raised his arms to the sky as the Djinni joined him, grinning at some joke only he heard.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," the Djinni herself said as she flashed in on Isaac's head. "Hm. Flint was right. Anyway, Nereid and Kirin I didn't particularly mind, but calling Procne down on me was a bit much, don't you think?"

"Who *are* you, anyway? Why haven't you given us what would seem to be the usual Djinn introduction yet? Powers of the earth, and all that," Garet added, seeing everyone giving him strange looks.

"I figure with two other Venus Djinn, plus a horde of others, you're tired of hearing it. But my name is Quartz."

"Quartz!" cried Torrent's voice, and she appeared atop Zoe's head.

"It's an obsession, I suppose," Zoe muttered.

"Hello Torrent. Long time no see. The point of this is to stop the destruction of the world, is it?"

"It would seem so," Torrent said in agreement.

"Let's get to it, then!" Quartz said happily. "It's not every day that we Djinn get out, you know," she said in response to several questioning stares. "*You* try being trapped in Sol Sanctum for a few millennia, and when someone offers you the chance to travel, see what you say." With that, Quartz and Torrent disappeared.

"Millennia?" Zoe asked.

"Apparently Djinn are older than we thought," Mia said.

"Come on," Isaac said with a resigned sigh. "Ivan, you might as well blast the next stump."

"Right on it, captain sir!" Ivan said, smiling so wide it looked like the grin would split his face.

"What's with him?" Zoe mused, gingerly picking her way through several inches of weeds and underbrush.

"Power rush," Mia said, following close behind. "The power that runs through someone with the larger Summons must have that effect."

"I hope it wears off, for everyone's sake. Ivan on a perpetual sugar rush isn't something we need to have right now."

"Tell me about it," Mia agreed as the green beast took off southward.

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"It went that way!" Garet cried, chasing the green monkey creature to yet another passage through the close-growing trees. By luck of the draw, he now wore an Elven

Shirt as a form of armor, giving him more speed than he had previously had. Isaac and the others followed behind at a more reasonable pace.

There was a sudden vibration coming from the stump Ivan had just thrown Force at. The Adepts turned around, watching it as it vibrated again, and also made a noise that was a cross between a screech and a growl.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Isaac mumbled.

"I think your feelings are contagious," Zoe muttered as something large, blue, and vaguely monkey-shaped leapt from the stump with another sound-barrier-shattering noise. It landed in front of the Adepts, separating Garet and Zoe from Isaac, Mia and Ivan. It was twice as tall as any of them, Garet included. And it was angry.

"Plan, Isaac?" Ivan asked, raising the Blessed Ankh in case the giant decided to attack.

"Any plan you have will beat what I have," Isaac said, raising a hand. "Ragnarok!" The Psynergetic sword sliced into the giant beast, doing no visible damage, but by the sounds the thing was making, obviously doing *something* uncomfortable.

"Isaac's plan is apparently 'throw whatever you've got at it and pray,'" Garet muttered. "Ah well. It beats sitting and letting it take us down. Fire!" Fireballs flew from Garet's hand, crashing into the monster from all angles. "I like doing that."

"I'm sure you do," Zoe agreed, calling on what most resembled her own fiery Psynergy. "Charge!" A giant fireball, easily twenty times the size of any of Garet's smaller ones, slammed into the creature.

"This looks like fun!" Ivan said, approaching the tail end of his power high. "Plasma! Take that, you gargantuan aqua gorilla!"

The gargantuan aqua gorilla itself wasn't in a very good mood anymore, not that it had been in the first place. To wake up to a smaller, lime green version of yourself standing on your head and then a sudden raucous banging on the outer walls of your stump isn't going to put *anyone* in a good mood. But now it was even more ticked off, and didn't mind professing that fact. Thus it focused on the next Adept in line to cast Psynergy.

"Tundra!" Mia cried, sending a wave of ice flying at the creature. Instead of reacting like she expected it to, with a scream or a stomp of a massive foot, it shot a hand out and closed five large fingers around her in a suffocating fist.

"Mia!" Isaac called, barely moving out of the way of the giant's other fist. Said fist struck Garet instead, sending him sprawling, but otherwise leaving him unharmed. Zoe and Ivan looked up in frustration, knowing without saying so that any Psynergy attack they threw at the thing would hit Mia as well.

Mia had her own ideas. Despite the way it appeared, Mia was not helpless, in fact had the hand holding her Witch's Wand free, and had years of practice at being calm during a crisis. Though it hadn't been quite this desperate at any other time in her life, she had a solution. The Psynergy was already rushing through her weapon.

Grinning, she brought the Wand down hard on the creature's hand and called, "Stun Voltage!" as her weapon's Psynergy was unleashed. However, she failed to realize that

the shock would also be sent through her, and with a deal of effort managed not to scream.

"Not a good idea," she said to herself in an increasingly more squashed voice as the fist began to squeeze. "Isaac!" she yelled down. "Use Psynergy!"

"It might hit you!" Isaac called back, unwilling to believe what she was saying. "I can't risk that!"

"Just do it! Anything that happens can be fixed with Psynergy!" Isaac picked up on the lack of air that accompanied the yell, and decided he didn't have much choice.

"Earthquake!" he cried, and the ground began to shake intensely. Ivan was thrown forward, just barely catching himself before slamming face first into the ground. Garet, half-sitting, found himself on his back again. Zoe fell to her knees.

"Isaac! Are! You! Mad?!" Garet's words were staggered between the jolts and bumps of the earthquake. Isaac got the message well enough, and the earthquake stopped, with the giant gorilla looking much the worse for wear.

"Mia?" Isaac asked tentatively. He felt himself begin to panic when he got no reply.

"Isaac, watch your back!" Ivan said, and Isaac ducked as the giant's fist swept over him. Regretting deeply what he was about to do, Ivan raised a hand. "I summon Procne!"

"Isaac's going to kill you," Zoe observed. "And Garet might too. Heck, I might, even."

"We have to get rid of this thing!"

"And kill Mia in the process?" At this suggestion, Ivan paled. "You didn't think of that or something?"

"Anything…I figured anything that happened, you or Isaac could handle," Ivan said quietly.

"Not being dead," Isaac whispered. The thing had nearly fallen, that was true. One more strike should do it. But could he risk it?

Garet provided the solution. Rising and grabbing his Broad Axe in both hands, he ran at the beast, swinging hard and connecting. Seeing that this might be the way to win, Isaac joined him, his Arctic Blade unleashing its Psynergy, Blizzard. With that final blow the giant fell, turning a faint grey and disappearing.

"There isn't anything left," Ivan said again, still seemingly shocked at the realization that he might have killed one of his close friends. "Does that…does that bother any of you?"

"There's something left alright," Garet said, roughly pulling Ivan to his feet and joining Isaac and Zoe in surrounding Mia. Upon seeing her, Ivan let out a long, low whistle.

Hands outstretched, Isaac cast Cure. A green light surrounded Mia for a few seconds, then faded, but nothing seemed to change. Likewise, Zoe tried Restore, but that had just as little effect. The four Adepts looked at each other, out of ideas.

"Somehow you always forget about us," said a quiet voice. Everyone's gaze except Isaac's became fixed on

Isaac's head, where Quartz now sat. "You think I'm useless, is that it? Never even bothered asking what I could do."

"Can it help us now?" Isaac asked, not bothering to try and get the Djinni off of his head.

"Yes. Unleash me," Quartz added in an urgent voice. "You've not much time before it won't work at all."

"Unleash Quartz!" Isaac said in a quiet voice, and the Djinni dissolved into a golden-brown light, surrounding Mia and growing steadily brighter. When the light faded, Mia's eyes opened, to the absolute relief of all present.

I owe you one, Isaac told Quartz in his mind.

Just keep doing what you do, Quartz replied with the mental equivalent of a knowing smile. Isaac rolled his eyes.

"Hey!" Zoe said, having risen and begun to head through the next pathway in the trees. "Come on! We've made it through!"

"If Nyunpa could see this one," Garet said, laughing to himself. Ivan gave him a quizzical look. "Ah, nothing. Just something I remember him saying."

"Isaac, you changed what you said when you unleashed Quartz," Ivan said, quickly switching the subject. "Any idea why?"

"It just felt right, I guess," Isaac said, smiling to himself. "Quartz is different, somehow, from Flint and Granite."

"Maybe it could be a usual thing," suggested Gust's disembodied voice.

"I'm hearing things," Ivan said jokingly. "Yah! Gust! No, stop!" Whatever Gust was doing couldn't have been that bad, because Ivan was laughing.

The rest of them stood and followed Zoe out of the forest and into the fading sunlight. "Another day gone," Isaac said in a low voice. "I wonder how close they are to Venus Lighthouse."

"They can't be too close," Mia said with certainty, though her feelings were quite different from her tone of voice. "Someone must realize that they're evil, at least."

"I sure hope so," Ivan said, looking down at the map in his hands. "There's a town called Xian not far from here," he added, pointing northwards. "We can stay there for the night."

"Looking forward to it," Zoe said, beginning to walk in the direction Ivan had pointed. The others caught up to her, and they walked five abreast the rest of the way, each of them with that confident, grateful smile that came from winning a tough battle with the aid of your friends.

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Vil: And so ends chapter 23! It got kind of long…but I managed to get through Mogall forest without telling anyone what rocks or logs moved where. Scary. So…anyone who hasn't and knows the story, go check out chapter six of Sunlight and Shade, because it's even longer than this one…oh! And read Shining in the Darkness by Feonyx. You won't regret it, even if it is lengthy. Later days!

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Chapter 25: Chapter TwentyFour: A Fruitless Endeavor

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Sorry this took so long. As most of you know, I've been working quite quickly on My Wish for You (go read it if you haven't *looks significantly at Triad*) and I've only just had a few ideas for this one here, so I suppose I'd better get to it! Oh—a select few of you know what *else* I've been working on in my non-ALWHI non-MWY time, and don't any of you dare reveal it! Garet, you might want to keep Akiko tied down for this specific secret thing. But don't worry, you'll love it when I'm done ;).

Griffinkhan: Ivan's had more than one prophetic statement in this story. But I do plan to reach the deadly spitting statues sometime this chapter.

Alex: What do you mean, poor Quartz? Quartz is my favorite GS1 Venus Djinni!!!

Jupiter Girl: Glad to know someone really liked that bit about why the gorilla was mad. I worked hard on that one. Now get yourself over to MWY and read whatever chapters are new for you!

Alayea: They do talk funny, don't they?

General Failure: Alright, I don't want to admit it, but… caught. I forgot completely about the Douse Drop! But don't worry—they'll get their hands on the thing.

On we go…

Chapter Twenty-Four: A Fruitless Endeavor

After a long, much-welcome stay in the Xian Inn (it took them about an hour to figure out which building was the inn—the sign was in a language none of them had ever read), Isaac and the others actually felt ready to face another day.

"It's something about Inns," said Ivan, enjoying some sort of purple berry that he had pulled from a nearby tree. "It's like we never even fought a battle yesterday."

"I think it's actually something about sleep," said Isaac, shining an apple on one end of his yellow scarf. "Almost like we're…recharging somehow."

"And the Djinn don't pester us while we're asleep, because they sleep too," Garet added brightly. For once, he wasn't eating anything. "Well, sleep in their own sense."

"Sleep isn't all that refreshing," Ivan protested. "I had some odd dream about us being related, Garet."

"You really didn't have to tell me that. Thank Mars you don't have prophetic dreams."

"Not yet, anyway."

"Hey look," said Mia, desperate for a change of subject and certain she'd hit on something that at least Garet would be interested in watching. "There's a guy kicking logs over." They watched as the man jumped at a log and kicked it. The log flipped end-over-end and landed on the stump in exactly the position it started in.

"That was nothing," said Ivan, pulling the Orb of Force from his pocket. "Watch this!" Holding out a hand, he

sent a Force blast at the log, which shot, spinning, high into the air and landed with a loud bang, standing upright. The man who had originally been kicking the log stared in shock, having not seen anything move it.

"I distinctly remember a rule about showing Psynergy to non-Adepts," said Mia crisply, beginning to walk ahead. "Or, more correctly, a rule about not doing so."

"Yes but he'll never know," Ivan pointed out. "Hey, purple-head, you're being pretty quiet. Something up?" Ivan turned around to face Zoe, walking backwards as he did so.

"Th'sun," she muttered. "S'm clouds. Couple birds."

"You do have a point."

"Ivan…you seem…um…over-active," Mia finished, unsure if the word 'excited' truly applied and unwilling to suggest 'hyper'.

"Yes. I don't quite know why myself. It's a nice feeling though. Maybe it's left over from Summoning Procne." Ivan shrugged, smiling. Really, it seemed like a perfectly nice day, with not even an ominous dark cloud hanging about.

"Or maybe it's just the way you are when you actually sleep," Isaac offered. "Apparently Jupiter Adepts are quite the hyperactive bunch."

"It's better than being dumb as a rock and about as smart as one too," Ivan argued. The others stared at him for a moment, as though unsure of what he'd just said.

"That was cold," Isaac said in a genuinely hurt voice.

"Wasn't talking about you, Isaac," Ivan said, grinning at Garet. "Well…not entirely," The Mars Adept then proceeded to make Ivan into something extra-crispy. Mia looked at Isaac, who rolled his eyes. With a sigh, she held out her hand and fired a stream of water at both of them.

"What?" Isaac asked, surprised. "What was that?" Ivan and Garet, dripping wet, looked quite shocked themselves.

"Well, I found this," Mia began, holding out a glittering blue stone, oval-shaped and about the size of a marble, "yesterday, right before we figured out that we'd gotten to the end of Mogall Forest. I landed on top of it, far as I know." Mia flinched as Fizz materialized on top of her head. "Fizz! There are people around! Get off there!"

"Oh. I forgot. But really, what do they care if I show myself?" Fizz asked in his usual dry tone.

"I care about not being asked several personal questions," Mia hissed. "Now *get off my head*!" Even Fizz knew to listen when she took that tone of voice, and disappeared. Instead, his voice spoke from nowhere.

"Douse Drop. Mercury Psynergy. Useful."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"Douse Drop, huh?" Zoe asked, holding out her hand. Mia dropped the stone into it. "It's got a sort of blue glow thing going on inside it." Handing it back to Mia, Zoe fell silent again.

"You! You look like you are warriors!" said a man, running up to them. Isaac hesitated, then nodded his agreement. "Come with me! See if you are masters of Chi as we are!"

"Chi?" Ivan questioned. Garet and Isaac shrugged. The three of them began to follow the man, as did Mia, but Zoe reached out and caught her shoulder before she could get too far ahead.

"What is it?" Mia asked, and Zoe pointed. Up on one of the cliffs was a Mercury Djinni. It bounced from foot to foot, appearing not to notice the people of Xian at all.

"I wonder how you get up there," Zoe mused, but suddenly found herself being dragged along by Mia, who seemed to have an idea of her own.

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"At the very least, you could have told *all* of us," Garet pouted, referring to Mia's newest companion. Zoe shrugged.

"Face it, you're just jealous that everyone except you has three Djinn," Ivan said smugly. "Only a second-level Summons for poor, big, oafish Garet—OW!" Ivan turned and looked at Garet remorsefully, and Garet looked up and the sky and whistled innocently.

"So apparently, the people of Xian call Psynergy 'Ki,'" Isaac continued, ignoring Garet and Ivan's arguments. "And whatever they do is called Chi. And that girl with purple hair is looking for someone who didn't come home early, or something," he continued as the conversation replayed itself in his mind. "Apparently this girl…Feizhi I believe…has… visions."

"Visions? She can prophesy?" Mia questioned, ignoring Mist, her newest Djinni, as she jumped from foot to foot on Mia's head.

"She said she got hit on the head by gems," Ivan recounted, jumping into the conversation. "I'm wondering if it wasn't the same as what Tret and Laurel were talking about."

"Psynergy stones? You think?" Garet asked, and the four of them continued their conversation. Zoe was only half listening. Ever since Fuchin Temple, something hadn't seemed quite right. She'd been alright in Mogall Forest, but now the feeling was catching up with her.

Strange things had entered her head after she'd collapsed in that cave. There were…images, of a family together, a mom, dad and three kids, laughing and talking and doing things like picnicking and sledding. Together. For some reason, these mental pictures brought tears to her eyes when she thought of them.

She didn't have the slightest clue who any of those pictured were, and she really didn't know why it bothered her so much.

And interspersed with those images were…others. Ones from just after she had met Isaac and Garet, fighting the thieves in Vault, and Saturos atop the lighthouse, and being taken captive by Tret Tree in Kolima forest.

There was a set of pictures, of a tall woman in her early twenties or late teens talking to someone whose back was turned, and holding a child in her arms. With tears in her eyes, she gave the child to the man she was talking to and turned away, leaving. Something about this seemed even more familiar than the images of the family.

Burned most prominently in her mind, however, was the figure of a giant, golden, flaming bird, so large it pushed away the night's darkness and lit up the world as though it were as bright as day. It was above a group of people she could not recognize, they were so small, and she knew that somehow, this was a picture of victory.

Something slammed into her—hard—from the side, knocking her to the ground and shaking her out of her reverie. Something else whooshed by over her head, making a sickening noise as it ran into whatever had knocked her down. Confused, Zoe looked up.

"Isaac!" Ivan cried, and Isaac grimaced. The fist of an Ape had slammed into him, and he'd done well to hold his ground against it, but it hadn't been a fun experience.

"Fireball!" Garet yelled, feeling the power of a new Psynergy surge within him. He followed behind his attack, slicing the Ape with his Broad Axe and watching with a satisfied grin as it disappeared.

"Thanks," Isaac said, then, "sorry Zoe. You were spacing, and you didn't see it coming, I suppose."

"It's my fault," Zoe said, frowning. "I have to watch where I'm going."

"Speaking of where we're going," said Ivan, pulling out the map and staring at the path they were on alternately. "North or west?"

"West."

"North."

"Well that certainly decides it," Isaac said dryly. "Why north, Garet?"

"Because Mia said west," he said with certainty.

"Well, that's…one theory. Likewise, Mia—why west?"

"Because this map says Altin is in the west, and if they're flooded like this Feizhi apparently says, maybe we can do something about it."

"She's got a real point there, Garet," Ivan admitted.

"Go north," said Forge, appearing on Garet's head. "You'll love it, I promise!" The Djinni disappeared before any questions could be asked. Isaac sighed.

"Alright then. Let's try north. But I swear I will wring that Djinni's neck if what's out there isn't worth it," Isaac warned.

The trek north was, if nothing else, boring. Nothing jumped out at them, nothing was lurking in the shadows and planning their demise, and nothing at all seemed even remotely interested in them. They crossed a bridge and found themselves on an island in the middle of a wide river. Isaac and Ivan stared at their surroundings while Mia and Zoe continued to look at the Douse Drop.

"Is there a point?" Ivan asked sharply. Garet looked around, at a loss. A voice somewhere near his head said, "Wait. Just wait."

A few moments later, something small, red and vaguely familiar strode out of the trees. And to watch a Mars Djinni attempt to stride is no serious matter. Ivan found himself laughing so hard he fell over, and Isaac wasn't much

better off. Mia just barely kept control of herself, and Zoe eventually joined Ivan on the ground. Garet just stared at the four of them.

"Oh, hello there," said the Mars Djinni in a pleasant voice. "And you are?"

"Uh…Garet…say listen, aren't you going to fight me?"

"Would you like me to?" the Djinni asked.

"It…it just feels like you're supposed to," Garet offered, and the Djinni attempted a shrug. Isaac couldn't take it anymore, and fell to his knees, tears in his eyes from the laughter. Even Mia was giggling now.

"Well, I suppose that if you want a fight, mister Garet, I'm not opposed to giving you one," said the Djinni slowly. "You're quite sure, now?"

"Get it over with before we die of laughter!" suggested Ivan, grinning like a fool. The Djinni looked at him haughtily.

"If you're certain," it said again, standing opposite Garet and appearing to be waiting for something.

"Erm…Flare Wall!" Garet ventured, but the Djinni dodged out of the way.

"And what happens after we fight?" it asked, bouncing.

"If I win, you join me and come along on this quest. Fireball!" Again, the Djinni dodged.

"And if I win?" it asked cheerfully.

"You won't. Heat Wave!" This attack, at least, hit home, and the Djinni laughed and emerged from the flames practically unharmed.

"This is fun! Do you guys do this every day?" asked the Djinni happily. Garet just stared. Ivan had been taken by another fit of laughter, followed closely by Zoe and Mia.

"That Djinni is way too good for you, Garet," Isaac commented. "Pure, untainted curiosity."

"I see a strategy in this one," Garet began, and was thrown off his feet by a burst of Volcano Psynergy.

"Garet, extra crispy," Ivan said, still laughing madly.

"You know…I'm really glad that all Djinn aren't like you," Garet said pointedly. The Mars Djinni looked shocked—or as shocked as any Djinni can look. "Too many questions makes me angry. Unleash Fever!"

The Djinni did not dodge as Fever was unleashed upon it. Instead, it happily cried, "Ooh! Another Djinni! I remember you!" and barely took notice as Fever's built-in effect, delusion, caused the world to grow rather hazy and begin to spin a bit.

"You're going down," Garet muttered, grabbing the Douse Drop from Mia's hand.

"Garet, what the—" Mia asked, but was cut short by a sudden, quick downpour, which drenched everything, including all five Adepts and the single visible Mars Djinni, which decided it didn't like rain much and formed into a

dozen tiny flames, which flew into Garet's hand and disappeared.

"Corona," he said, grinning. "See, now I can get back at the rest of you. If you pick on me, I'll bring out Corona to ask you all questions."

"*Now* can we go west?" Mia pleaded. Isaac nodded his agreement. Garet handed Mia back the Douse Drop, and they began to walk westward, Ivan and Garet arguing as the other three walked as far in front of them as possible without their noticing.

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"Never thought I'd see the day that Garet the Great Mars Adept of Vale resorted to Mercury powers to bring down a Mars Djinni," Ivan said, still laughing quietly.

"So you've said," Garet muttered through clenched teeth. "Seventy-three times."

"A Mercury *attack*," Mia corrected for the seventy-third time. "Singular. Definitive…well, more definitive than 'powers'."

"Can we stop?" Zoe asked, instead of adding in her usual 'What other option is there?' and having Mia explain it again. "It was a nice way to pass the time and all, really, but it has passed the point of old, and even ancient, and is getting towards dead. Quite close to dead, actually."

"Hey, isn't that the girl from Xian?" Ivan asked, and Isaac nodded. He had become quite good at tuning out the repetitive conversation over the past hour or so. "What's she doing here, and how did she get ahead of us?"

"She probably passed us when we took Garet's detour," Zoe said, walking up to the girl and tapping her lightly on the shoulder. "Excuse me? It's Feizhi, isn't it?"

"Oh!" Feizhi cried, turning around. Spying Isaac, she looked at him pleadingly. "Warrior, what should I do? Should I return to Xian?"

"It's in his personality," Garet said to Zoe consolingly.

"Well, what are you doing here?" Isaac asked, quite at a loss.

"I am looking for Hsu," she said plainly. Isaac's face went slightly red.

"Is he here?"

"He is supposed to be near here," Feizhi said. Isaac sighed.

"Quite honestly, I think you should return to Xian," he said resignedly. Feizhi studied him carefully.

"It is kind of you to consider my safety," she said after a pause. "However, I must stay and find Hsu."

"Alright then," Isaac said, turning to walk away. Halfway to where the close cliffs opened up again, Mia stopped him.

"You're just going to let her stay here?" she asked sharply. Isaac looked at her, his face Venus-calm.

"In my experience, trying to change the mind of a woman is a fruitless endeavor," he offered with a smile.

Garet grinned, and Ivan snickered. Zoe and Mia looked at each other, identical looks on their faces.

"This merits a plot of revenge," Mia said to Zoe.

"Oh yes, it does," Zoe said maliciously.

"Good. You two work on that while the three of us head to Altin," Isaac said, hiding a grin as he continued to walk.

"You just wait," Mia said ominously, and the five of them continued their trek to the town of Altin.

When they arrived there, however, the mood changed from light and jovial to quite serious. Walking to the edge of Altin's tallest cliff, the Adepts studied the situation.

"Perhaps it rained here a lot recently," Ivan offered. "This place is practically a giant rain barrel, with the way it's built."

"No," Zoe said with a note of laughter in her voice. The others looked at her, wondering what in the world she could be laughing at. "No, I don't think that's it at all. No rain could do this."

"Then what could?" Garet asked.

"That," Zoe stated, pointing. Isaac followed her finger, saw what she was looking at, and groaned.

"Ivan, I am beginning to hate it when you offer random suggestions," he said, squinting at what looked for all the world like a giant spitting statue. Only it was alive, and flooding the town of Altin.

"Let me guess," said Ivan. "Not only was I right when I thought of these before, I'm betting we have to fight them if we want Altin to stop looking like someone built it in the middle of a lake. Literally."

"I think that's it," Garet said. Ivan sighed.

"From now on I'm keeping my big mouth shut."

"You do that."

The five of them quickly decided that it was better to drain the village, even if it meant showing them all Psynergy, than to let it continue to be flooded. Further complications arose when they approached the 'giant spitting statue' only to have it retreat into a nearby cave opening.

"Mines," Ivan said, standing in front of the opening and feeling a light, cool breeze coming from inside. "Altin's famous for it's gem mines."

"Shall we go in?" Isaac asked, looking at the others.

"Yes."

"Of course!"

"Yeah."

"Like we have a choice."

"Alright then. Let's do it." And with those words, the Adepts stepped into Altin Mine, ready to hunt for whatever it was that was causing Altin so many problems.

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Vil: Another chapter, finally. Sorry it took so long, and sorry My Wish for You is taking longer. There are…things afoot (though not in Contigo). What things? I cannot tell. Not just yet, at any rate. So, by now you know the drill…

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Chapter 26: Chapter TwentyFive: Prophecy by Mistake

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Many apologies for this taking so long—several things, not all of them good, happened in succession and delayed this chapter. One of those things is the OSP—yes, that was a shameless plug. Another of those things is an all-out computer revolt (it doesn't like me, I swear), and that's part of the delay. The third thing…well, that one's a surprise ;). I realize some of you have been waiting fo this for a long time and I'm really sorry it took so long but DT came first. So, belated responses to the reviewers…

Midnight: Aaaaahhh! You're the first review for the chapter! (And I won't even bug you about OSP, because you sent it.) Everyone seemed to love the Corona exchange, actually. I'd hoped they would anyway. Hehehe.

Griffinkhan: How is it you always figure out these…*things* that I've been missing? Alright, suppose Ivan reads Zoe's mind, but someone's definitely trying to keep them both out, so a similar thing happens to him (sound familiar?)? And Ivan or one of the others would have to think of it first. It *is* a good idea, yes, but I do have my reasons. You'll see… it'll all come together in the end.

DimelessPoet: *blush* Thanks for the compliment…since I know you love Isaac to pieces, I'll try and write this fast for ya ;).

General Failure: No, somehow I think Ivan will still blurt out the occasional accidental prophecy. But he can make a valiant attempt, right? …Ok, maybe not…

Jupiter Sprite: Well…I can probably tell you, actually. "Yes," was Mia, "Of course!" was Garet, "Yeah," was Zoe, and, it being a cave, "Like we have a choice," was Ivan. He doesn't like caves.

Now, on to the chapter!!! (Almost filled a whole page with the dang review responses…not that I mind, I like reviews… Akiko! Elena! Where were ya???)

Chapter Twenty-Five: Prophecy by Mistake

"Ivan," said Garet, squinting into the half-dark of Altin Mine.

"Yes?" Ivan answered, peering into the gloom as well. Neither of them was exactly sure what they'd just seen, but neither also wanted to be the first to admit they might have seen it. It would sound as though they were crazy.

"You didn't see it use Psynergy or climb the ladder? Because I didn't," Garet added hastily.

"Neither did I," Ivan agreed with a nod.

After a few moments' silence, Isaac stepped between them, heading for the ladder. "Well, since it's so obvious neither of you saw it, then by all means let's follow it," he said with a smile.

"What's with him?" Ivan questioned.

"It's a cave," said Mia, sighing and following Isaac. "He's a Venus Adept. Poof, like magic, only a bit more believable." Ivan, Zoe and Garet shared a shrug, then followed Isaac and Mia up the ladder.

One by one they jumped across a frozen pillar, the only way to cross the gap between two sheer-sided rock 'platforms'. Isaac went first and nearly slid off the edge of the ice, jumping at the last possible moment and doing what passed for a forward roll upon reaching the other side.

Garet followed behind, slipping forward and overbalancing, just barely grabbing the edge of the frost pillar as he tumbled over. His fingers quickly found out how painful it was to be hanging by their tips from slick ice.

Muttering to himself about Mercury and all its bad points, he tried several times to pull himself back onto the pillar. On about his fourth try, he succeeded, and wasted no time in standing—and falling over, backwards this time, to land hard on the ground between the high rock where Mia, Zoe and Ivan stood and the pillar.

"Garet? You alright down there?" Zoe called, having just vaulted onto the column herself and thus having a better view than Mia or Ivan.

"Never better," he grunted, standing and determinedly climbing the ladder again, albeit more slowly. "No Mercury-created rock is going to stand in my way," he grumbled, glaring at the frost pillar and taking a flying leap at it, springing off the top of the ice with unusual agility and landing, sliding along until he came to a stop near Isaac.

Ivan slid on the ice as well, but, using his staff as a sort of lever, was able to launch himself to the opposite side. Mia came last, landing on the column without moving an inch. She stood there looking smug for a few moments before joining the rest of them on the opposite ledge.

"Not even funny," muttered Garet almost inaudibly.

"No, not really," Isaac agreed, frowning.

"Don't bother asking, the answer is no."

"Well then, shall—"

"The answer to that is also no," Garet growled. Isaac's eyebrows rose and he took a step back.

"Suit yourself," he said, in an 'as-you-wish' manner.

"Look, there's a sliding thing," said Ivan.

"And our spitting friend down below," added Zoe. "No sense putting it off, I suppose," she added, skidding down the gentle slope and landing behind the giant spitting statue. Ivan and Mia were quick to follow, Isaac behind them and Garet last.

Quite boldly, Ivan walked up behind the statue monster and, using the Blessed Ankh, tapped it on one shoulder. As the beast turned its head, Ivan whispered, "Unleash Zephyr," and all the monster caught sight of were a few lingering particles of violet light.

As it turned to regard the four faces illuminated *behind* the light, there were simultaneous calls of, "Unleash Granite!" "Unleash Forge!" and, "Unleash Mist!" Flashes of green, red and blue light momentarily blinded the Living Statue, giving Isaac and Zoe the chance to rush in, Arctic Blade and Elven Rapier at the ready, and score two hits. The creature lashed out with its claws, striking at Isaac but scraping uselessly against Granite's barrier. Its tail came around at Zoe, but also slammed only the barrier.

"Plasma!" cried Ivan, a rain of lightning bolts sprouting from his outstretched hand and falling around the Living

Statue, striking it several times before dissipating.

"Heat Wave!" Garet quickly followed, sending an onslaught of scorching flames at the beast. It roared in protest, apparently weakest to the fire element. Garet grinned—now *this* was a fight he could enjoy.

"Ok, so Garet's happy now," Ivan grumbled, ducking as the Living Statue's tail came around for another swipe.

"Better than him angry," Mia put in, not at all oblivious of the fact that Mercury Psynergy would be virtually useless against the creature. Instead, she swung the Witch's Wand around, connecting with the beast at the exact instant she shouted, "Stun Voltage!"

Electricity coursed through the Living Statue, and it roared, lunging forward with its teeth to close its mouth around Mia; the Mercury Adept was looking quite petrified by this time.

"No way," said Zoe angrily, pointing two fingers at the beast. "Charge!" A large fireball whooshed past Garet's head, barely missing his hair, and slammed the Living Statue hard enough to make it let go of Mia. Isaac, once again atop the ledge, frowned.

"Cure Well," he said in Mia's direction, and greenish light flooded the half-dark cavern. Satisfied, Isaac leapt from the ledge and threw out a hand. "Ragnarok!" The Psynergetic sword and Isaac's Arctic Blade hit at the same time, and Isaac landed with a thud on solid stone as the Living Statue faded to grey and then to nothing.

"Well that was interesting," Ivan said after a moment's pause. Crouching, he lifted something from the ground. It

was a light blue stone, with an ice-blue light barely twinkling in its depths. "What in the world?"

"A Frost Jewel," said Mist, who was hopping from foot to foot on Mia's head. "It's the only way we can get out of here."

"Is it now? But Mia already knows Frost," Garet pointed out.

"Keep it anyway," said Zap's disembodied voice. "Who knows when it may be useful?"

"How wonderfully refreshing for you to be your old cryptic self," Zoe said tartly. There was a short, crisp laugh from the general direction of her head, and Zoe scowled.

"Ivan, Isaac, do *your* Djinn act this way?" she asked as they watched the water that had been in the cavern drain away. Mia climbed down a ladder and used Frost on one of the few remaining puddles to create a pillar, and the Adepts crossed it one by one.

"Mine aren't that bad, actually," Isaac said as they waited for Garet, who was last to cross. "They don't complain much or pester about how I do things."

"How can they be annoying?" Ivan asked cheerfully. "Gust loves puzzles, Breeze loves heights, and Zephyr loves adventure."

"Mia?" Zoe asked hopefully.

"Nope, sorry. Only Fizz ever argues, but he's rather old and stuffy and has been since I've known him."

"Old and stuffy!" Fizz's voice protested, and Mia giggled.

"Garet?" Zoe questioned, as he had finally joined the rest of the Adepts. Garet paused in thought as they walked back out of the cavern.

"Can't say so, no. Well, Corona's annoying with the constant questions…that battle was something I never want to have to face again."

"It's starting to look like just your Djinn are troublesome, Zo'," said Ivan. "Or perhaps just Zap. After all, they say age makes a person lose his mind—why shouldn't it be the same for Djinn?"

"I am not old," Zap's voice protested. "I am simply more aged than my naïve counterparts." The villagers were beginning to stare, but they quickly redirected their attention to the moderately lower water levels.

"What do you suppose we do now?" asked Garet, looking over the edge at the half-abovewater roofs and cliff faces.

"There's a mine cart track down there," Isaac said, pointing. "It leads into another part of the mine, I bet. I think we go in there."

"Oh great," Ivan grumbled as they made their way to the next ground level. "More caves."

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"We've been following this track forever," Zoe pointed out, hopping from one wooden crosspiece to the next. "Maybe we should've taken that door back there."

"I had the feeling that I was being told to ignore that door," Ivan mumbled. "Then again, I'd like to ignore any semidark doors in a cave. Heck, ignoring caves altogether would be—"

"Stop complaining," Isaac said cheerfully. Garet grunted. Isaac frowned, but said nothing more.

"Maybe this wasn't even the right entrance to go through," Mia observed, frowning and looking around the room they'd just entered. "Wait, never mind. There's one of those statue things. But…how are we going to reach it?"

"I know how," said Isaac, moving at a fast walk around the perimeter of the room and coming to a stop at one of the sections of cart track. The others quickly caught up to him and stared.

"No. I refuse. Absolutely *not*." Garet made emphatic gestures to support his refusal, then gasped as quietly as he possibly could.

"Stubborn," Isaac muttered.

"It's old, rusty and probably more dangerous than Saturos," Mia pointed out; another no.

"Well…uh…look, these sorts of things make me edgy, alright?" Ivan said defensively. "I don't even want to *be* here. Much less ride around in some broken down mine cart!"

"I think it might be fun," Zoe ventured, smiling. *Always one for a thrill ride*, said a voice from…somewhere. She shrugged off the odd chill she got when she heard that voice speak.

"Hold on for a second," said Mia, and she began to walk along the track until she reached a split, squinting at the two diverting tracks and trying to figure out which one would be the one taken by the cart. Smiling in a very satisfied way, she glanced around for a few seconds and then walked to a switch and pulled on the lever. The rusty tracks squealed and screeched as they changed over. Brushing her hands off, Mia rejoined the others. "There."

"I thought you were against this," Isaac said as he climbed into the mine cart.

"Someone has to be sane around here, might as well be me," Mia said with a shrug, climbing in after Zoe. "Come on Ivan. You too Garet," she added, her voice pleasant but with a touch of iciness that seemed to chill the very air.

"Was she like this in Imil?" Garet asked no one in particular, squeezing into the last available space in the mine cart and sort of squashing Isaac and Ivan in the process.

"Might've been," Ivan offered in a breathless voice, but the rest of his words were cut off as the cart started down the short incline, sped around several turns and, in a moment when every Adept let out a shout, launched into the air above the water created by the Living Statue and landed shakily but safely on the track on the other side.

"Uf," said Ivan, bringing his elbow down onto Garet's back. The Mars Adept yelped again, and Ivan huffed. "Served you right, sitting on me like that," he mumbled, and Garet climbed from the mine cart and glared daggers at Ivan all at once.

"So…another statue fight, huh?" Zoe asked almost casually. She could feel something beginning, like a chain

reaction going off, and she wanted to finish whatever it was.

"Hey ugly!" Ivan shouted, and the Living Statue turned around, spied the Adepts, and launched into an attack.

"He's really brave for being so small," Isaac mumbled, drawing the Arctic Blade.

"Lightning zaps water," Zoe said, as though the reason for his bravery were obvious. Isaac paused for a moment, shrugged, and charged headlong to meet his newest challenge.

The Living Statue fired a blast of water at the Adepts, who managed to scatter before anything particularly dangerous happened. Ivan wrung out his wet sleeve and pointed in what he hoped was a gallant way at the giant monster. "Storm Ray!" Bright flashes of lightning shot from Ivan's fingertip and slammed into the thing, knocking it backwards. Cockily, Ivan blew on his finger, then realized he was acting stupid when the tail of the statue knocked him senseless.

Isaac's eyes lit up, and he grinned as something inside him clicked. "Quake Sphere!" he cried, enjoying the earthy light that came out of the ground and almost giggling as he watched the Living statue get tossed around by the earthquake.

"I'm not being outdone this time," Garet said, wishing he'd had the good sense not to refuse Isaac earlier, ignoring his wish and standing up straight, holding out both hands. "Flare Wall!" A raging wall of flames wrapped around the creature and moved in, searing.

"Really. Stealing all the fun," Mia mumbled, unable to do much as it was—Mercury Psynergy used on a Mercury-

aligned creature would practically cancel itself out.

Zoe's eyes held a light much the same as Isaac's, and her hands glowed with a light as crimson as Garet's hair. She watched them, felt power run through her and the last of the pieces clicked into place in her mind.

"Magma!" she cried, and molten rock shot forth from her hands, giving the room a soft orange glow, and the Living Statue couldn't avoid the onslaught.

But how? Zoe's mind asked. *I don't understand!*

In time, you may.

"What?" Zoe asked aloud, but whatever voice had answered her, it was gone now. She watched as Mia's hand made a few intricate motions and a blue light surrounded Garet, who wasted no time in glaring as hard as he possibly could when the only one he could be rightfully mad at was himself, and Isaac and Ivan defied the fact that Venus and Jupiter weren't meant to mix and combined forces, with Ivan's lightning dancing along the Arctic Blade, supercharged by the sword's water alignment. Isaac struck the Living statue and it fell, disintegrating.

"Well that was fun," Ivan said cheerfully. The water drained away, revealing a ladder leading down into the hole where the water had previously been. Ivan took the initiative and grabbed the top of the ladder, swinging himself to the ground and landing with almost perfect balance.

"Why can't he climb like a normal person?" Garet asked no one, following Mia down the ladder. Zoe came next and then Isaac, and the Adepts trooped on into the next room, only to find themselves blocked by a large, immovable rock.

"You know what this means, right?" Isaac asked in a voice that carried the weight of doom.

"Back in the mine cart," Zoe said quietly. All the Adepts groaned.

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"Back-to-back," Isaac said calmly. The other Adepts readily complied, turning their backs to each other and aiming their weapons at their newest opponents. An Ape, two Rat Fighters, a Tarantula and two Slime Beasts surrounded them.

Another shaky, bumpy, terrifying mine cart ride had landed them very close to the next Living Statue, but they'd been ambushed by what Garet referred to as 'generic cave things' before they could reach the water-spewing beast.

"Anyone has any new tricks up their sleeves, now's a good time," Mia muttered. "To state the obvious, we're outnumbered."

"I'm starting to think I should learn how to do magic," Zoe spat, ducking a spear swing from one of the Rat Fighters.

"You already do," Ivan pointed out. Zoe looked at him, and he looked back, and they fought off laughter. Isaac looked at them both and gave an annoyed shrug. There was the sound of metal clanging, and Isaac looked up to find Garet's axe blocking the other Rat Fighter's speartip from impaling his own head.

"Uh, thanks," Isaac offered sheepishly. "Earthquake!"

"Heat Wave!"
"Tundra!"

"Plasma!"

"Storm!"

Psynergy flashed in several colors, each striking a different set of monsters and doing various things that seemed only accomplishable with several Psynergies going off at once. And Isaac grinned as he watched every last one of them fade out and disintegrate.

"A fight with no casualties," he said, satisfied.

"Not on our side, anyway," Zoe added, and the others laughed. Constant battling had made them all extremely adrenaline high. It wouldn't have been entirely true to say they weren't all enjoying it. "I think that's also the fastest fight I've ever had."

"That one with the…no, wait, that took about five minutes more," Ivan corrected himself. "Are we going to take out the next statue thing or not?"

"I'd rather like a rest," Garet commented, and right on cue Isaac began heading for the ladder. "You're no fun," Garet complained.

"Battle's fun," said Mia, lifting her Witch's Wand and smirking evilly, following behind Isaac with a determined bounce to her step.

"Probably doesn't like having monsters that defy the purity of Mercury," Garet muttered to Ivan and Zoe, who giggled. "Or, you know, just wants to beat up on something. She's really…vicious for a healer, isn't she?"

"I heard that," Mia said calmly—the room's temperature didn't even fall. She just continued down the ladder, ready to face the next Living Statue.

The battle went smoothly. Mia was thrown into the water at one point, but pulled herself out in time to catch the end of the Living Statue's tail with the electrified end of her Witch's Wand, shocking it. Garet took the opportunity to unleash Fever, and the monster was surrounded by a cloud of delusion.

"It's about time you remembered us!" said Gust as she was unleashed. Ivan just shrugged. The voices that were often debating various topics in his head—the Djinn—had been awfully quiet recently anyway, and it was doubtful any of the Adepts had noticed that the Djinn were even still existing.

Garet swung his axe and Isaac slashed with the Arctic Blade and the battle was over. "That's it?" asked Garet, looking at where the Living Statue had once stood. "That's the whole battle?"

"Be happy," said Isaac, catching hold of Garet's sleeve and Mia's shoulder as he cast Retreat, taking them back to just inside the entrance to the mine. "It means our Psynergy's stronger." They walked out into the sunlight, orange and red as it had just begun to set, and looked down into bowl-shaped Altin, now empty of water.

"We did it," said Zoe calmly. "Altin isn't flooding anymore. We can keep going."

"Not at night we aren't," said Isaac.

"That's a shock," Ivan muttered sarcastically. "We'd better head for the Inn, then. Er…right? Hello? Mia, come

on!" But the Mercury Adept was staring down at another mine track heading into a door, the lowest level of Altin Mine.

"Hey, Mia," Zoe said, coming up beside her. "What's up?"

"There's still something down there," Mia said in a distant voice. "It's not something good, either. It's…a presence. Threatening."

"Let's go on in then," Isaac said with conviction, flicking the end of his scarf behind him and walking—striding, really—down a ladder and back into Altin mine. Garet had, in days past, dubbed this 'the leader strut.'

Once inside, they found a few abandoned mine cart tracks and one with the cart still attached. At the end of a twisting, jumping, abrupt path there was a Mercury Djinni.

"I'm not riding in that again," said Ivan, crossing his arms and backing away. Isaac, who was studying the layout of the track and frowning, nodded.

"Good. Ivan, take the Frost Jewel and go freeze every puddle you see, down here and up there. Garet, move that big, flat-topped rock there about two feet to your left…your other left…Zoe, follow Ivan up and flip the switch so the arrow points to the Djinni. Yes, like that. Good. Mia, you and Garet get in the mine cart and go take on the Djinni," Isaac finished, looking very pleased with himself.

"He's a bit too into the leader mode," Garet muttered as he sat in the back of the mine cart and gripped the sides in pure white-knuckled terror. They reached the Djinni without any major problems, got themselves mixed up and had Isaac, Ivan and Zoe nearly stunned as Mia summoned

Tiamat—a giant dragon with breath of flames—and Garet summoned Neptune, a sea serpent that attacked with a violent spray. The battle ended that fast.

"Spritz," said Mia, grinning at the idea that she now was ahead of all of them in number of Djinn, though it was hardly somewhere she wanted to be—all that meant was more voices. Annoying little Djinn voices.

There was a door as well, leading into the next room. The Adepts walked through it and through another, following a twisting path of rocks up and around and up some more to a sign with a log behind it.

"Watch for falling rocks," read Garet. "Do not strike the wall. Rocks may fall. Oh please," he went on, kicking at the sign. "Like we'd ever be afraid of a few little rocks." On cue, a giant rock that brought back horrifying memories of he boulder that had fallen from Mount Aleph three years before tumbled from above, and the Adepts ran, leaping and jumping over smaller rocks and whipping around other ones. They had almost made it when the rock clipped Zoe's shoulder, and she was sent tumbling down with it. There was a loud crash and the ground shook.

When it stopped, Isaac crawled to the edge and peered over. A giant hole had been made in the ground, with bent and twisted mine tracks leading down into it. Neither the giant rock nor Zoe were anywhere in sight.

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That's the end of this chapter. I bet it was much better than chapter 24, yes? I'd agree if you said yes. Longer too. And a cliffhanger!

You know, I never realized how much was in Altin Mine until I had to write about it.

Till next time!

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Chapter 27: Chapter TwentySix: Voices on the Wind

As Luck Would Have It

A/N: Here we go with another chapter! Many apologies for a chapter that ended up being a lot of dialogue. Next one has more battle, I promise.Thanks all of you for my **203** reviews!!!

Isaac says Booga: Yes, it was a cliffie. On purpose. But this one isn't, not really.

General Failure: No matter what the voices are, it will **never** be the Wise One! I hate him!

Midnight: No pizza. I'm so sick of pizza. And thanks for your review!!!!

Pianobuggy: I know that you're not at this chapter yet, but many congratulations for being the 200th review!

Now to reading! I don't do this for my health, you know ;)

Chapter Twenty-Six: Voices on the Wind

"Isaac?"

"Yeah?"

"This isn't good, is it."

"No, Ivan, it's not," Garet answered for him. "There's a large hole in the ground that a big boulder just took Zoe through and apparently there's a room down there."

"And dungeon logic says that the biggest, meanest thing in here will be in that room," Ivan added, shuddering at the thought. "I just hope it'll go down without trying to take one or more of us with it."

"Do they ever?" Mia asked dryly.

"Well no. But one can dream."

"No one's falling asleep yet," said Isaac from near the giant hole. The others stared at him in shock—how had he gotten down there without any of them noticing? "Come on, the tracks lead down into the hole." Isaac grabbed one of the nearly-split tracks and began to descend as though on a ladder.

"Isaac!" Mia cried as one of the wooden crosspieces snapped, and Isaac fell backwards into the blackness with a solid thud. There was a soft groan from the hole, but a flash of greenish yellow assured them that nothing too awful had happened.

"Down the ladder that isn't really but pretends to be we go, then," Garet said, though he didn't volunteer to go first, assuming that the ladder wouldn't have a chance at holding his weight if it hadn't held Isaac's, and it would be easier to land on all three of them than just solid stone.

Ivan and Mia made it down without slipping, and aside from one rung, the track-made-ladder didn't break under Garet's weight either. However, they were now standing next to an immensely large boulder with no sign anywhere of their missing Adept.

"Do you think…" Ivan began, but something made him stop. As though not saying it made it an impossibility.

"No, look," said Mia, pointing. Zoe, or most of her, covered in dirt and dust, lay half-buried in a pile of rocks, unconscious. "She's alive," Mia said in relieved tones. "But this…this big rock, it's on top of her. We can't get her out."

"Can we push the rock?" Garet asked, quite confident in the idea that if that was their option, he'd push the dang rock until the sun set and rose again twice, if he had to.

"That might make this whole situation worse," Mia said, shaking her head slowly. "The only thing I can think of would be to lift the boulder straight up. But that's impossible, even for all four of us together. It's far too heavy."

"So then…what?" Isaac asked, for the first time in a long time at a complete loss. It was beginning to look like their only choice would be to leave Zoe here…Isaac refused to finish that thought. He wouldn't have gotten to finish it anyway, as at that moment an inhuman roar sliced through the cavern.

"I was right," Ivan said with no satisfaction whatsoever in his voice. "The biggest, meanest thing is in here. Why did I have to open my big mouth?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that I may be crispy-fried," Garet said, looking at Isaac for a moment, then beginning to walk along the dimly-lit hall. "Well, come on, fearless leader," he said, when Isaac was the only one not to follow. "Easier to solve the problems we can first and worry about those improbable ones later."

"What's with him?" Mia asked, looking at Isaac curiously.

"He made this 'promise' to take over as leader whenever it became apparent that I couldn't. Obviously he thinks that's right now. So he's dug up some big words from the recesses of his mind and adopted that way of walking which looks ridiculous. Do I look like that when I switch into leader mode?"

"Not *as* comical…" Mia began, letting her sentence hang. Isaac laughed to himself quietly. Ivan watched this with growing interest. He, on the other hand, was quite angry with all of them.

"Look, there it is," Isaac said quietly as they rounded a corner and came face-to-face with the largest of all the giant spitting statues they'd seen so far. It seemed to him to be the cause of this whole problem, and to Isaac, his mind still on the fact that not all of them might make it out of here alive, it was the ultimate enemy.

Something snapped within him then, something that until now he'd not known he possessed. Up until now, it had seemed so simple. They'd fight whatever they had to, as long as he got to go back home when it was over. As long as they all did. Somehow, it hadn't seemed real until he had to make the choice to leave…to leave someone behind.

The others watched as Isaac drew his Arctic Blade with grim determination, face set in anger, which was rare for Isaac—nothing seemed to bother him this bad often—and charge the giant monster at a flat-out run.

"That is *it*," Mia said, her voice just under a screech. "I am not letting him make a fool of himself out of anger. Garet, Ivan, let's go." Mia stormed after Isaac, Witch's Wand held at the ready.

"She scare you too?" Ivan asked numbly. Garet nodded. "Good. Least I'm not alone."

Isaac barely knew what he was doing. He was face with an enemy, the ultimate enemy, and it stood in his way. He was dimly aware of voices—were they in his mind?—that were telling him he was being stupid. He refused to listen to those voices. He would take this thing down, because it was the only thing keeping him from finding a solution.

"He's lost it," Garet said in shock, watching Isaac attack relentlessly. The rest of them could hardly do anything but stand there—any Psynergy was sure to hit Isaac just as hard as it did the statue, and any move to attack would probably get the attacker slashed to pieces without Isaac ever knowing he'd done it. "Ivan, you go first."

"I'm short, Garet, not stupid," Ivan retorted sourly.

"It's like he doesn't even have rational thought," Mia mumbled more to herself than to anyone else. "Like he's acting purely on emotion, or instinct…or something. If… hm…" At the sound of Mia's pensive humming, Garet and Ivan ceased their argument and looked her way.

"Ivan, that Ankh might just about do it, and with Zephyr, you'll be fast enough," Mia said, obviously planning out loud. Ivan looked down at the weapon in his hand, then up at Mia, not understanding. "Call on Zephyr and use it to whack Isaac on the back of the head."

"Uh?" Ivan asked, both at a loss for words and having too many of them to make a coherent sentence.

"I'm serious. We can take the statue thing down and worry about Isaac afterwards. Just trust me and do it!" Mia

cried, exasperated. "I can't, or I would, but I run the risk of electrocuting him."

"Alright, alright!" Ivan said, a quick shudder running through him. "Zephyr!" Bright purple light flashed around Ivan, and he took a step forward faster than Garet's or Mia's eyes could follow. Within seconds, he was following Isaac's every move, and with a nearly-visible wince he brought the Ankh around in a short swing, smashing the flat side into Isaac's temple. Isaac dropped like a stone.

"NowsomeonetellmewhyIjustdidthat," Ivan said, coming to a stop about three feet away from the statue. Mia and Garet stepped forward, and Ivan grinned mischievously, reaching out both hands and putting one on each of their shoulders. Zephyr's power transferred almost instantly, leaving the three Adepts viewing the world at ultraspeed.

Psynergy attack calls blended together, and fire, ice and lightning practically rained down onto the giant statue, by name a Hydros Statue. It tried to retaliate, tried rather valiantly, but the Adepts were far too fast and too powerful for it to do more than drench them.

There was complete silence when the Hydros Statue disintegrated,

"We did it!" Garet said excitedly the minute he'd slowed down enough to be understandable. "We beat the last water beast!"

"I wonder where they all came from," Ivan said quietly. "I mean…living statues? Isn't that a bit strange? And I'm still out to find someone who knows how they got a tiled room down here. And Mia, why did I knock Isaac out?"

"So the monster didn't do it a bit more forcefully. And these statues were probably made a long time ago. It makes me wonder what they were for." As she spoke, a light shot through the cavern, striking the wall and turning into a small treasure chest. Garet walked up to it, crouched down, prayed it wasn't a Mimic and popped the lid.

Reaching inside, he pulled out a squarish object about the size of the Orb of Force. He could feel it's Mercury alignment just by touching it, and he tossed it to Mia quickly, yelping as though he'd been burned.

"That's a Lifting Gem," said Fizz's voice out of the air. "It will enable your Psynergy to lift large rocks straight into the air."

"That's it!" Mia said excitedly, turning and running back down the long hall. "That's what we need!" her voice called back. Ivan and Garet hurried after her.

"Give it here," Ivan said, reaching out and hand, and Mia tossed it back to him. He wrapped his fingers around it, knowing it was Mercury Psynergy but also knowing that, with Mia about to be otherwise indisposed and Garet having something along the lines of Mercury-phobia, he was probably the best one to be using it.

Holding it in his left hand and extending his right, he let the new Psynergy flow through him. "Lift!" he cried, watching the phantoms of hands appear on either side of the giant boulder pinning Zoe and lift it into the air. The hands disappeared, and Mia and Garet cried out, but the boulder continued to float.

Garet and Mia together freed Zoe from the pile of rocks, but she didn't even offer a groan or a sigh. Ivan, face noticeably pale, silently begged that he could stop holding

this rock high, but he kept it there until they were out of the way, and it touched down softly, raising a small cloud of dust. With a sigh of relief, Ivan sank against the wall and wiped the back of his sleeve across his forehead.

"How do we always wind up in these situations?" Garet asked no one. "Ivan's too weak to stand, I think Mia's having one of those long-thought-process moments, Zoe's half-dead and Isaac…Mars! *Isaac*!" Turning on his heel, Garet sprinted back down the hall and around the corner.

"Forgot 'bout Isaac," Ivan mumbled. "Lef' him behind with th' treasure ches'."

"We have to get out of here," Mia hissed, though the back corner of her mind knew her words fell on semi-coherent ears. "All five of us. *Now*."

"I don't think we can do that, Mia," Garet said, coming back around the corner with Isaac, the latter supporting himself on the former's shoulder. "Ivan's Ankh sealed Isaac's Psynergy."

"It's a wonder he didn't get stepped on!" Mia cried, turning to face Garet. "Isaac, I'm sorry we had to do that. But it was either we took you out the friendly way or the Hydros Statue took you out for good."

"No, no…it's alright…I've just…got a headache," Isaac said haltingly. "And…and my…Djinni…you can use Quartz…"

"Isaac," Ivan said plainly. However, the Jupiter Adept's head fell to his knees and he couldn't find the strength to finish his thought.

"Isaac, do it," Mia said, her voice gaining the quality of a shining steel blade with the flat pointed towards you. "Call on Quartz."

"Okay…yeah…Quartz…" Isaac muttered. Quartz flashed in, making 'tsk' noises, then dissolved into greenish light that descended over Zoe and flashed twice, then disappeared altogether.

"We're still not getting out of here until four out of five of us can get out themselves," Garet warned, setting the barely-awake Isaac down next to Ivan. "You and I can't get all three of them out of here."

"Isaac's Retreat Psynergy would be ideal," Mia agreed, sitting down herself. "We might as well stay the night here. There won't be any monsters in this lower cavern—they won't come near the hole, not even for easy prey."

"Mia will…be up all night…anyway…" Isaac whispered, and Garet laughed. Isaac began another sentence, but didn't get as far as the first word before he was out, asleep on the ground.

"You might as well sleep too, Garet," said Mia. "Isaac's essentially right."

"Yes. And I want to risk the three of them when you get so tired you collapse against some random rock? Not happening. *You* sleep first," Garet added, in case Mia didn't quite get the idea he was headed for. Mia seemed about to argue, but a yawn caught her before she could continue. Garet was, to her mild shock, right—they'd been fighting all day with little if any rest, and she was no good to anyone if she yawned every fifteen seconds.

Pulling off her cloak, she rolled it into a ball and used it for a pillow. Garet laughed to himself—Mia was asleep faster than Isaac had been. Garet smiled with some well-deserved smug satisfaction, then sat down and leaned against the wall, determined not to fall asleep.

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"Garet!" a voice said in the Mars Adept's ear. He mumbled and rolled over. "*Garet*!" The voice was more insistent this time.

"Five minutes. Or else I'll scorch your head," Garet added half-threateningly.

"Good, you do that. And while you do, the four of us will be headed for the surface, in Altin. Have a nice five minutes," Ivan finished, smiling as Garet sprang to his feet, suddenly fully alert. "See, I knew that'd get him up."

"All of us? As in everyone standing and ready to go?" Garet asked incredulously. He didn't have to ask, though; the evidence was in front of him.

"Only waiting on you," Isaac said pleasantly. "So, if you actually *are* ready…oh good." Isaac grabbed hold of Garet's sleeve and cast Retreat. The five Adepts were instantly transported to the muddy dirt just inside the entrance to the mining tunnel. They walked outside into a bright, sunny day on semi-dry ground.

"Well, we got rid of the flood," Zoe said quietly. The others looked back at her. "The houses and shops, they're still all wet inside, I imagine. Everything is ruined."

"They'll find ways to fix it. But maybe the weapon shop is open," Garet added, excitement in his voice. "We can

find new weapons. I mean…the rest of you get weapons with Psynergy sort of built in. I get this axe."

"Well, not like it doesn't suit you," Isaac offered, half a consolation, half a mocking insult. Garet scowled.

Minutes later, Garet still held a regular Broad Axe and was complaining rather loudly, but the weapons had rearranged a bit—Ivan had the Elven Rapier, Zoe the Blessed Ankh, and Mia ran her hand along the shining newness of her Psynergy Rod.

"The path along Silk Road is blocked," said the smith as they were leaving. "You'll have to find the passage in the mine that leads west."

"Passage in the mine?" Ivan groaned. Isaac, however, grinned. He knew the exact spot. Rushing off, the others scrambling to keep up, he raced through the deep mine, around sharp turns and once nearly through a wall, until he came upon a large rock about twice his height.

"This is it," he said confidently. Ivan stepped up and used Lift, rushing under as soon as the others had made it and wincing when the boulder came crashing back down. They went though an opening and into a smaller, longer cavern, with another rock farther down the passage. This they also Lifted, and with a sharp left turn and a few long moments as they passed giant spiders that appeared to be sleeping, they were out of both Altin and Altin Mine.

"Look there!" said Ivan, pointing westward. "It looks like a small town or something. And there," he added, turning eastward, "is the other side of Silk Road. Looks like Isaac picked the right way to go, after all."

"You doubted me?" Isaac asked, feigning sadness.

"Always," Ivan replied slyly.

"The map," Zoe added, pulling it from her bag and opening it, "says that the 'town' Ivan's talking about is Lama Temple, and southwest from there should be the Lamakan Desert."

"Desert?" Mia asked warily. "I'm not sure I'm up for deserts. All that…dry. And hot."

"We may not have to go that way," Isaac offered, though he knew it was a lie right after he'd said it. Of course they'd have to cross the desert. Did it ever happen any other way?

"Let's go to Lama Temple, then," Mia said. "I don't think any of us are up to a desert crossing *today*." There were unanimous nods, and, with Isaac in the lead, the five of them began the walk to Lama Temple.

Upon their arrival, sometime around noon, they found that the place was inhabited mostly by what could only be called monks. A group of them were meditating in a circle in a clearing set back from the main path, and a few more were simply doing chore-like things—tending a garden, sweeping a front stoop, that sort of thing.

Ivan was the last to walk onto the temple grounds, but when he did, he noticed a profound change. Everything about him seemed calmer, more settled, and the light breezes that blew about him—here he began to question his sanity—felt almost like they were speaking to him.

"Anyone else get a serene feeling from this place?" he asked, but there was no affirmative reply. Ivan shrugged. He liked it, and too bad if he *was* going crazy and hearing the wind talk—it was bound to happen eventually.

They walked into the main temple building. At the far end, a woman with purple hair stood facing the wall, apparently deep in meditation, a fact which a monk nearby quietly confirmed. At the sound of his voice, though, the woman turned.

"So, Isaac," she said in a melodic voice, "you and your Adept companions have finally come."

"Finally come?" Garet asked. "You were expecting us?" the woman nodded. "How did you know…we'd be here now?"

"I had…anticipated…your arrival," she said, obviously lost for the words to use to describe her knowledge. "I did indeed know you were coming. I have been waiting a long while for you, for you come seeking the Elemental Stars."

"You know about the elemental stars too?" Ivan asked in a near whisper. "Who…who are you?"

"I am Master Hama," she said, nodding to Isaac deferentially. "I am a Jupiter Adept, just like Ivan."

"A…a Jupiter…Adept? Like me? What are you talking about?"

"You may not know it, Ivan, but you and I are very much alike," Master Hama said with a wink. Ivan only grew more perplexed.

"Why do you say that?" Mia asked, in an effort to shed some light on this subject for all of them.

"Does he not have the power to read minds?" Hama asked, looking back at Ivan, who nodded. "That ability is unique to Jupiter Adepts."

"I knew that. I knew what kind of Adept I was. They told me," Ivan added when Hama grew confused. "But you predicted our coming. Is this Psynergy also?"

"Yes, the ability to foresee events also belongs to the Jupiter Adepts."

"Then can Ivan learn the power of prediction too?" Isaac wondered aloud. He wondered to himself whether Ivan hadn't already done that, many times. But those occasions, he recalled, were majorly guesses, right out of thin air.

"He already has," Hama said cryptically.

"I don't think I have—" Ivan began, but thoughts of the Altin Mine statues stopped him. Maybe he had, after all.

"You just don't realize you have that power, Ivan," Hama said kindly. "Jupiter's powers are great indeed, granting us sight of what is to come. But, Ivan…you can learn, and use, an even greater power." Ivan gave her an inquisitive look. "You can learn to see what is already there."

"I think I manage that well enough," Ivan mumbled. "I haven't walked into anything in a while."

Hama laughed, a clear, ringing tone, almost like a chime. "No, I mean to see what is there, but hidden from those without the power of Reveal."

"Reveal would be the name of this Psynergy?" Isaac asked. Hama nodded.

"I have waited long to pass the power of true sight on to you, Ivan," Hama continued, almost distantly.

"You waited here in Lama Temple just to teach Reveal to Ivan?" Zoe asked. "Why didn't you seek us out? You might have found us much faster that way."

"Things are as they were meant to be. Future sight does not mean we can change it," Hama said, avoiding Mia's first question, a tactic which Ivan noted with some interest. "You all will need Reveal if you are to achieve your goals. Jupiter Adepts can learn it on their own, over time, but that power and the time it would take will only hinder you in your quest. It was Saturos and his companions who blocked Silk Road," Hama added darkly.

"Felix and the rest of them!" Garet said in outrage. "The cowards!"

"Your friend Felix bears a terrible fate. It is a burden I would not wish on any man," Hama said gravely.

"Terrible fate?" Isaac asked with come concern. "What do you mean?"

"Of that, I cannot say," Hama said, shaking her head. Isaac took an angry step forward, but Zoe put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. "For now, we must focus on the power of Reveal. Without it you cannot cross the Lamakan Desert."

"I knew it," Mia muttered. "I knew we'd have to cross that…dry."

"Is an evil desert even possible?" Garet questioned. Isaac shrugged. So much of his world had turned upside-down recently, he was about ready to believe anything. Except that trees could fly, of course.

"Why will we need Reveal to cross?" Zoe asked.

"The heat of the desert has become unbearable, and monsters walk the sands. Entering the Lamakan now is nothing short of inviting death to take you," Hama said. "Saturos and Menardi, Mars Adepts, can perhaps suppress the heat unconsciously with their power as they cross. Reveal will help the four…the five of you find oases as relief from the heat."

"Won't we be able to see the oases?" Mia questioned. Hama shook her head.

"They are hidden. The desert is filled with mirages that prevent you from seeing clearly. Without Reveal, you will not find the oases. And I suppose I should give Ivan that power now…" Hama trailed off, averting her gaze.

"What's wrong, Master Hama?" Ivan asked. "You can pass Reveal on to me…can't you?"

"I am unsure that it will work," Hama said softly. "In preparation for this day, I tried to pass a power on to a young girl. That power was not Reveal, and she was not an Adept, but it was my belief that anyone could hone a skill he or she already possessed. But there was no change."

"No!" said a voice from the doorway. "There was change!" Feizhi ran in, pushing past the Adepts. "I sensed it! Hsu is in great danger! I know he left here long ago, but he did not return to Xian! I fear the boulders in the mountains have trapped him! I am here to ask for help."

"What brought the power to you now, Feizhi, after so long?" Hama asked out of pure curiosity.

"Gems fell from the sky," said Feizhi. "One hit me right on the head."

"Then this may work after all," Hama said excitedly, turning back to Ivan. "But first we must help Hsu!" Hama and Feizhi hurried out the door.

"Wait, please, Master Hama!" Ivan called out. "Teach me Reveal! It worked for Feizhi, it can work for me too!" Hama returned, nodded agreeably, raised her hands and sent a purple light through the air. Ivan was immersed in its glow for several moments, and when it receded, he was smiling.

"Use it to cross the desert," Hama said, turning to leave. "Ivan, I'm glad to see you've grown into a strong young man." With that, she left.

"Ivan," Zoe asked, and the Jupiter Adept spun around. "Do you and Master Hama…know each other?"

"No, we don't," Ivan said plainly. "But…she doesn't feel like a stranger."

"Let's get moving," said Garet. "Felix and the others have to be so far ahead it'll take weeks to catch them."

"It will if we let *you* lead," Isaac agreed. Garet frowned. "Besides, we can't just leave like this. We're going to help Feizhi and Master Hama get Hsu unstuck. Yes, we are Garet, stop giving me that look. Let's go."

"I wonder what Master Hama was talking about," Ivan said to himself as they left.

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Isaac and Garet arrived at the entrance to Silk Road first. Or the exit, if you were coming from the other direction. Large rocks blocked their way, but somehow Hama and

Feizhi had made it to the other side, where Hsu lay trapped under a boulder.

"We seem to be doing lots of rock stuff today," Ivan remarked, catching up. "Well, what's the news?"

"Come again?" Garet asked, looking at Ivan incredulously.

"What are we going to do here?" Mia asked, she and Zoe joining the boys.

"We can't reach the three of them. Heck," Isaac continued, "I don't even know how Feizhi and Master Hama reached Hsu."

"Hey, Master Hama!" Zoe called. Hama's head snapped up, and she spotted the Adepts. "How do we get over there?"

"*Why* do I *never* think of these things?" Isaac grumbled.

"Perhaps because you're surrounded by piles of stone?" Ivan offered helpfully. Isaac glared at him.

"Ivan."

"Yes?"

"If we are going to continue to both be functioning members of this little team, comments like that are going to have to cease to exist."

"I have to stop making fun of Venus?"

"Basically."

"Use your power, Ivan!" called Hama. Ivan looked down at his hands, at a loss for some moments, until he remembered. "Reveal," he said quietly. The world became a mass of shades of grey, and occasionally gray. Except for himself, the rest of the Adepts…and a door now visible in the wall of the cliff. He dragged the others through it, and they emerged on the other side. Hama and Feizhi were trying unsuccessfully to free Hsu from the boulder, but they weren't strong enough.

"Here," Isaac said, taking the Lifting Gem from Ivan. Raising his hands, he used Lift, moving his arms upward as the Psynergy hands raised the boulder.

"Isaac, did you lift that boulder?" Hama asked. Isaac grunted.

"He did," Garet translated.

"Quickly Feizhi! We must pull Hsu free!" Hama said, and she and Feizhi grabbed Hsu's arms. "Ready yourself, Hsu, we're going to pull. One, two, three!" They pulled as Isaac strained to keep the boulder in the air. Hsu was half out when the boulder fell a few feet.

"Isaac!" Mia gasped. "Can you hold it?" she asked as the boulder rose again. Isaac gave a quick nod. Hsu was pulled the rest of the way free, and Hama sent he and Feizhi back to Feh, with a message to clean up the rocks on Silk Road. She then lead the Adepts back through the hidden door and to Lama Temple.

"Adepts, let me thank you again," she said to them as they shared lunch. "I am truly grateful. I did not expect you to come and aid us."

"What kind of heroes would we be if we didn't?" Isaac asked, looking much better after having eaten and sat down for a while.

Hama laughed. "You are right."

"Thank you for passing the power of Reveal on to me, Master Hama," Ivan said, smiling. "But…there was something you said…"

"What is it, Ivan?" Hama asked, not looking up from her plate. Ivan frowned but said nothing more.

"Well, really, I was the one who suggested we come and help you, right?" Garet asked, swallowing a mouthful as he spoke.

"No!" chorused Isaac, Zoe and Mia together. Hama laughed again.

"You are welcome to stay here in the temple for the rest of the day and start off in the Lamakan tomorrow. Thank you for your help, my friends. Travel well." With that, Hama rose and left the room.

Garet poked Ivan's shoulder until he turned to look at him. "Weren't you going to ask Master Hama about what she said earlier?" he asked. Ivan sighed.

"We do not know when we'll be able to see Master Hama again," Mia added.

"But whatever you want, Ivan," Isaac added quickly.

"Thanks, guys," Ivan said, "but it's better if we leave now."

"Instead of tomorrow?" Garet asked, shocked.

"Yes. Master Hama hasn't looked me in the eye since she said those words. "It makes me curious, but it also makes me wish to leave it alone. And I'm tired of hearing the wind talk to me. I doubt she would have told me anyway, even if I'd have asked," Ivan added, more to lighten the mood than anything else.

"Well then we're on our way," Isaac said, standing. "Into the Lamakan Desert."

Hama will tell me when the quest is over, Ivan thought to himself, trailing behind Zoe as they walked out of the temple. *I'll just have to believe that*.

****

The end of another chapter. Starting to turn out, it is. And I have the end all plotted (many thanks to the muse) so… keep reading!

Hail: Arr! Or I'll throw ye ter the sharks!

sighs and walks away

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